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# More with Less: Trends in UK Diplomatic Engagement in Sub-Saharan Africa

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## SUMMARY POINTS

- After ten years when humanitarianism and the Department for International Development (DFID) dominated UK engagement with sub-Saharan Africa, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) is now expected to lead on Africa issues once more.
- This reflects an important, and growing, recognition that development objectives can best be pursued with reference to UK interests in Africa, but also an extremely strong, and potentially controversial, focus on boosting UK trade. It is still unclear how Africa sits as a priority within FCO, and UK strategic thinking, including within the National Security Council.
- Despite some additional capacity announced by the UK coalition government, the FCO is stretched in its coverage of Africa, with UK diplomatic engagement in large areas increasingly relying on micro posts staffed by one or two UK diplomats. Such widespread use of micro posts is unprecedented and untried. If successful in Africa their use is likely to become more common globally.
- Such posts can represent value for money, but also bring a number of risks. In these circumstances, the United Kingdom must rely on a combination of advancing technology and exceptionally skilled staffing if it is not to lose further influence to emerging competitors and risk prominent exposure of a growing gap between aspirations and capacity in a highly complex and increasingly important region.
- The UK has a growing resource of expertise in its African diaspora communities. They increasingly pursue active political and economic roles in many African states as well as in the UK, with many bilateral links now far deeper than official links would suggest. The FCO needs to engage better with such groups if it is to maintain its relevance and improve its expertise and advice.

## INTRODUCTION

In May 2011 Foreign Secretary William Hague promised to strengthen Britain's diplomatic network while saving money overall.<sup>1</sup> This paper explains the likely practical impacts of such measures on UK diplomatic engagement across sub-Saharan Africa, and highlights some of the challenges and opportunities, both for the current government and for the UK as whole, that may emerge as a result.

Soon after his appointment, William Hague indicated that he would like to see a more energized approach to policy-making and greater emphasis on bilateral relations in the United Kingdom's diplomacy.<sup>2</sup> At the same time reforms to the Cabinet Office mean Africa-related issues are no longer passed up to cabinet via a DFID-chaired cabinet committee, but through a less region-specific mechanism via the new National Security Council.<sup>3</sup> While there is a clear commitment that the Department for International Development will retain a critical role in development policy, which has a significant impact on Africa, there is an expectation that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office will now lead on many Africa-related issues more than has recently been the case. DFID itself is undergoing significant reform, with some uncertainty ahead.

The 24% cut to the FCO budget (including the British Council and BBC World Service – an inclusion disputed by the FCO) that was agreed under the government's Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) comes in the wake of several years of pressure from the fall in the value of sterling and from other funding cuts.<sup>4</sup> Fortunately there has been no new closure of diplomatic missions to follow that of three (and a consulate) in 2005, and indeed there is a pledge of additional diplomats for UK missions in Nigeria, Angola and Botswana, and the possibility of up to four more opening, in South Sudan, Madagascar, Côte d'Ivoire and Somalia, over coming years.<sup>5</sup> Moreover the Foreign Secretary has insisted he wishes to maintain a UK diplomatic network across the world. Africa has rarely been a high priority for the United Kingdom, but because DFID was expected to lead on many aspects of policy related to Africa in recent years, and in the context of high-priority requirements in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere, spending on most Africa-related issues has lately been a lower priority for the FCO.<sup>6</sup> Resources allocated to Africa activities are, with a few exceptions, extremely stretched, and the British presence on the continent already consists of a network in which large regions are covered by as few as one or two diplomats in the field.

Although DFID will remain a distinct government department, a higher proportion of the United Kingdom's overseas development assistance (ODA) will be recognized in activities of the FCO (as well as other government departments), particularly as they relate to Africa. The two departments will also share more resources. This move is contentious because formally separating ODA from

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<sup>1</sup> Hansard, HC debate, 11 May 2011,

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmhansrd/cm110511/debtext/110511-0001.htm>

<sup>2</sup> William Hague, 'Britain's Foreign Policy in a Networked world', 1 July 2010, <http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/news/latest-news/?view=Speech&id=22551011>.

<sup>3</sup> An Emerging Powers sub-committee was established in 2010 with South Africa a focus for its work.

<sup>4</sup> Bizarrely, the FCO disagrees with The Treasury on the 24% figure and claims only a 10% cut. This latter figure does not include the 16% cut to the BBC World service or 25% cut to the British Council. Yet there is no recent precedent for the FCO excluding these budgets, and both organizations for now remain within the purview of the Foreign Secretary. For previous cuts see 'The Role of the FCO in Government', Foreign Affairs Select Committee Report, May 2011, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmfaff/665/66505.htm#n40>, paras 26–30. Under the 2011 CSR the FCO's operational core budget fell from £1.6 billion to £1.3 billion (the same as for the Department for Culture, Media and Sport) in 2015, with £200 million spent on administration and £1 billion on programmes. See the FCO Business Plan 2011–2015, November 2010, p. 18, <http://www.fco.gov.uk/resources/en/pdf/about-us/our-publications/fco-business-plan-2011-2015>.

<sup>5</sup> This needs careful examination. The current consulate in South Sudan will be upgraded to an embassy upon that country's independence. The intention is to open a new embassy in Somalia 'when the security situation improves sufficiently', which is unlikely to be during the course of the current UK parliament. Similar provisions apply to the intention to reopen an embassy in Madagascar, closed (for the second time – previously it had been closed from 1975 to 1980) in August 2005 to save £250,000 per annum (see British Diplomatic Oral History Programme, interview with Brian Donaldson, p. 40, <http://www.chu.cam.ac.uk/archives/collections/BDOHP/Donaldson.pdf>). The Foreign Secretary will 'consider' the upgrading of the political office in Côte d'Ivoire to a full embassy.

<sup>6</sup> A good indicator of this is the absence of Africa, other than South Africa, in the FCO Business Plan 2011–2015.

the remit of the FCO was a symbolically important step taken by the previous Labour government, and was applauded by development campaigners.<sup>7</sup>

The coalition government has indicated that trade will be a particular focus for its international engagement, including in Africa. This is at a time when many sub-Saharan African countries are attracting increased commercial interest from a number of competitors to the United Kingdom. UK Trade & Investment (UKTI) currently has a presence in nine sub-Saharan African countries and the FCO in 26 countries, from which all the countries of sub-Saharan Africa are covered. UKTI is unlikely to receive additional resources for its Africa operations in the foreseeable future, and therefore the FCO (often with fewer staff) will be expected to take the lead in encouraging trade, in addition to its other current responsibilities.

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<sup>7</sup> For a detailed view of the possible impacts of the CSR on DFID and ODA, see Budget4Change Briefing Note, 20 October 2010, <http://www.budget4change.org/briefing-note-the-effect-of-the-uk-comprehensive-spending-review-on-oda>.

## OVERVIEW

The Africa Directorate is one of the largest regional departments of the FCO, covering all of Africa, except the five North African countries and Mauritania<sup>8</sup>. It has around 55 dedicated staff in London who work with a network of 26 embassies and high commissions and subordinate posts, as well as colleagues across other FCO directorates and Whitehall departments. There is also a network of honorary consuls in countries across sub-Saharan Africa. With 46 countries to cover, the Africa Directorate has responsibility for geographical coverage of twice as many states as the next largest directorate. Many of these states suffer from multiple and complex challenges. In this context, despite aspirations to maintain a global network, the UK is hard pressed to maintain a comprehensive, meaningful coverage of Africa in its entirety, and on current trends that coverage will continue to shrink in coming years.

Yet this general picture masks huge variations in coverage, capacity and focus, with some posts maintaining far greater capacity than others. In its dealings with African states, the UK will find it ever tougher to credibly claim a comparable status to that of the United States, China and others. Eight other countries, including Brazil, South Africa and Japan, now have more embassies across Africa than Britain, and they will soon be joined by Turkey. Yet even with a relative decline, the UK will retain greater capacity on Africa than most other countries. The opportunity to utilize a nascent and growing, if often cumbersome, European Union presence across the continent is an additional asset, as are the number of other multilateral, informal, private-sector and advocacy networks within which British citizens play important roles. This also includes an emerging engagement by the devolved administrations of Wales and Scotland.<sup>9</sup> Increasing numbers of British citizens have close family and cultural links with African states, and the legacy of the Commonwealth, along with the United Kingdom's continuing prominent role across a range of international issues, will maintain British influence more than a simple reliance on embassies might suggest. The challenge for the FCO, working increasingly in partnership with other departments, is to innovate in ways that use these assets (even if they are reduced in some cases) to advance British interests.

Capacity will remain substantial in countries and regions that are of particular interest to the UK, namely South Africa, Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Ghana, Sudan, Ethiopia, Uganda and Kenya. For these countries, which represent high-priority regional or bilateral interests, funding, staffing and organization will remain at a level that allows diplomatic functions to continue in more or less a traditional manner (although non-traditional tools will play a growing role there too). Beyond these eight countries, the UK network will have to rely increasingly on new ways of building and sustaining relationships, seeking advantage and addressing threats. Below such top-tier diplomatic missions, there is currently a category of permanent UK presence known as 'small posts', i.e. embassies, high commissions or subordinate posts of between two and six UK staff and a similar number of locally engaged staff. Within this, however, is an emerging category of 'micro posts', with just one or two UK staff and a few locally engaged staff. The number of micro posts is likely to grow over coming years, particularly if the UK network is expanded.<sup>10</sup> This raises serious challenges, particularly in terms of staffing, resilience, security and oversight.

Certain reforms will mitigate the impact of more recent cuts to the FCO, although how they will be implemented is still uncertain. The increase in the proportion of ODA being channelled through the FCO is one factor that might have a considerable impact on the functioning of the Africa Directorate. As Foreign Secretary, William Hague argued early on that additional ODA should be included in FCO spending.<sup>11</sup> In addition, the government has indicated that it wishes to see the FCO and DFID work more closely together, including sharing premises. Small DFID national programmes in Angola, Burundi, Cameroon, The Gambia, Lesotho and Niger closed in March

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<sup>8</sup> The Sudan Unit, based in the FCO, is a joint FCO/DFID unit, and a good existing example of the kind of cross-departmental cooperation that is likely to increase in the future.

<sup>9</sup> Adjoa Anyimadu, 'Scotland and Wales in Africa: Opportunities for a Coordinated UK Approach to Development', Chatham House Africa Programme Paper, March 2011.

<sup>10</sup> The current working terminology is Very Small Embassy Posts (VSEP), but this is likely to change.

<sup>11</sup> William Hague, Testimony to the Foreign Affairs Select Committee, Developments in UK Foreign Policy, 8 September 2010, uncorrected transcript, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmselect/cmffaff/c438-i/c43802.htm>.

2011, but others, for instance in Zimbabwe, received an increase in funding.<sup>12</sup> DFID itself is undergoing significant restructuring and realignment to maintain its focus on poverty alleviation, but with a greater emphasis on conflict prevention and wealth creation that should see increasing engagement with existing FCO priorities. It seems likely that staff from both departments, as well as others, will be expected to swap roles and multitask more, although it is important to note here again that the government remains committed to DFID as a distinct department represented by a secretary of state in the cabinet, acting in a manner distinct from narrow UK interests. There is, however, a greater expectation that national interests will ultimately take precedence where tensions occur.

These changes and other opportunities, such as utilizing new technology, offer the possibility of a UK network in Africa that may be smaller than that of some other countries but takes positive advantage of this and other factors to be more mobile, strategic and nimble. The danger is that such efficiencies leave the UK network vulnerable to threats. Africa is a complex, fast-changing and highly unpredictable continent where, despite recent progress, travel and basic operations can be beset with unforeseen challenges.<sup>13</sup> Rapid reaction from crisis-management teams based in London may remain an imperfect substitute for solid, locally based capacity. Finding ways to make this kind of deployment work well is going to be key to the United Kingdom's maintenance of effective relations with an increasingly important group of countries.

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<sup>12</sup> DFID, 'The future of UK Aid, where we will work', <http://www.dfid.gov.uk/Media-Room/News-Stories/2011/The-future-of-UK-aid/>.

<sup>13</sup> A telling comparison is that 31 defence attachés/advisers cover the 50 countries of Europe, but only 13 cover the 46 countries of sub-Saharan Africa. Source: Hansard HL Deb, 8 November 2010, c10W, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201011/ldhansrd/text/101108w0001.htm#10110823001432>.

### Box 1: What are the United Kingdom's interests in sub-Saharan Africa?

In recent years, acknowledgment of UK interests in sub-Saharan Africa has become something of a taboo – in part owing to the legacy of British Imperialism and the emergence of Africa as a 'sacred space' in policy and media circles where development and humanitarian objectives are seen as exclusively selfless.<sup>a</sup> Yet this denial of interest has become not only self-deluding but also counterproductive,<sup>b</sup> as development policies are far more likely to be implemented when rooted in interests and framed with reference to them. The FCO has used different ways of expressing or prioritizing interests. The former Labour government's eight Departmental Strategic Objectives have now been replaced by three more overarching priorities. Such broad priorities, while politically expedient, have not contributed to a coherent sense of the UK's Africa strategy.<sup>c</sup>

Apart from purely developmental interests, the UK has four essential interests in sub-Saharan Africa:

- To prevent/minimize instability where it threatens the UK itself, e.g. in the form of terrorism, crime or uncontrolled immigration. Currently this is related to the Horn of Africa, the Sahel, Sudan, the Great Lakes region and Nigeria.
- To keep UK citizens abroad safe through the provision of consular support.
- To promote British trade interests, including secure access to natural resources, and especially energy security, but also in support of broad-based development.
- To gain and utilize allies across Africa to build support for UK objectives and positions in international forums such as the United Nations. This includes support for the UK's status as permanent member of the UN Security Council and its prominent inclusion in other international forums relating to climate change, trade and other issues.

At present only the first two of these interests are fully recognized – if imperfectly implemented – by the United Kingdom. The third interest has been formally recognized by the coalition government, though there is uncertainty as to how to pursue it, and also a lack of resources to do so. The fourth interest seems barely recognized, yet it is a principal driver for much engagement by emerging powers with Africa. Many of these powers are seeking the support of African states for their bids for elected UN Security Council places. This is a challenge the UK need not face for now, but its position as a permanent member does rest on international perceptions that it deserves that status and is prepared to put resources into retaining it. More generally, other countries are competing with the UK in seeking the support of African states (which account for over one-quarter of UN member states) for their positions in international negotiations related to sanctions, trade, international justice, the environment and other issues.<sup>d</sup> London does lobby African states, but needs to do so in a more nuanced way if it is to meet its goals in an increasingly complex international environment. The failure of the UK National Security Strategy to explicitly recognize these interests, or that of the new National Security Council to address them, represents a key challenge given that Africa-related issues generally suffer from a shortage of heavyweight champions within the government.

<sup>a</sup> See Julia Gallagher, 'Britain "Doing Good" in Africa: What Opportunities for African Agency?', paper presented at Chatham House conference on 'Africa International: Agency and Interdependency in a Changing World', 9 October 2009, [http://www.chathamhouse.org.uk/research/africa/research\\_events/view/-/id/1271/](http://www.chathamhouse.org.uk/research/africa/research_events/view/-/id/1271/).

<sup>b</sup> See Tom Cargill, *Our Common Strategic Interests: Africa's Role in the Post-G8 World*, Chatham House Report, June 2010, <http://www.chathamhouse.org.uk/publications/papers/view/-/id/888/>.

<sup>c</sup> Richard Mills, US Embassy Cable, 6 February 2009, sourced from *Guardian* website, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/190885>.

<sup>d</sup> The recent case of Uganda's rotating UN Security Council presidency in October 2010 and demands for non-interference in its pre-election preparations in return for support for sanctions on Iran are just two examples.

## INTERESTS AND ASPIRATIONS: A RECENT HISTORY OF UK AFRICA POLICY

Until very recently there has been little tension between the need to serve narrow UK interests and longer-term developmental policies in sub-Saharan Africa, largely because since the end of the Cold War successive governments rarely recognized significant national interests in engaging with Africa. In addition there has been public distaste regarding a perception that some UK policies, including on aid, have had a corrupting relationship with UK business at the expense of human rights and good governance in African countries where a weak state is unable or unwilling to protect the interests of its citizens. The Labour government elected in 1997 responded to these growing concerns by establishing DFID as a separate government department tasked with implementing development policies that were completely separate from national interests as served by the FCO.

This policy change has since manifested itself in the strong lead taken by DFID in formulating Africa-related policy, and the FCO's relative lack of emphasis on Africa. On the ground this distinct development-led approach was symbolized by the separate staffing and infrastructure that DFID built up in most African states, often at some distance from FCO missions. In the cabinet this was recognized through DFID's chairing of the regional committee on Africa. Effectively, in most countries in Africa, DFID came to represent the main link with the United Kingdom, with the FCO playing a more or less supporting role (with some significant exceptions), despite still formally representing the UK government.

Increasingly, that compromise is now being called into question, for several reasons. First, stability and prosperity have been improving (albeit from low levels) for the past ten years in many African states, and an expanding number of emerging powers are vying for their raw materials, markets and political support.<sup>14</sup>

Secondly, these African governments now have greater autonomy, appear better placed to protect their own interests, and are increasingly resentful of conditionalities imposed by traditional donors such as the United Kingdom regarding good governance, human rights and environmental and other issues. Many of Africa's new partners do not impose such conditionalities on aid, although their assistance often appears closer to the 'tied' aid that traditional donors have largely left behind. Related to this is an emerging view that the UK's aid contribution is less visible, less appreciated and less influential than it should be within many recipient governments, partly because it is delivered in a low-key technical manner, unlike the smaller contributions of others.<sup>15</sup>

Thirdly, there is an increasing acknowledgment that development assistance must support private-sector-led growth. This in turn requires an encouragement of private-sector investment, including from the United Kingdom, in a manner that engages directly with the role of the FCO and UKTI as promoters of British trade. It also coincides with renewed criticism in the UK of the ring-fencing of overseas development assistance at a time of austerity, the coalition government's desire to impose a distinctive policy that incorporates a strong private-sector emphasis, and acknowledgment of the need to support the national interest.

Finally, Africa is increasingly recognized as a source of immediate and longer-term threats to the United Kingdom, such as international terrorism, uncontrolled migration and climate change. This has pushed many other Africa-related issues up the agenda in Whitehall and encourages a more nuanced appreciation of UK interests as a whole.

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<sup>14</sup> For a fuller description of this process see Cargill, *Our Common Strategic Interests*.

<sup>15</sup> This is not to say that development assistance should be used overtly in support of other UK objectives, only that the political leverage required to ensure, among other things, that aid is effective is often lacking. The recent emergence of the 'UKAid' branding on some DFID operations and materials is a partial and imperfect response to some of these complaints.

## DOMESTIC POLITICAL RISKS FOR CHANGING UK POLICY

These changes threaten to expose the tensions between national interest and development in a way which, if left unaddressed, could lead to greater criticism in the United Kingdom and unintended consequences abroad for the current government. This risk is particularly pronounced for the Conservative-led coalition because the Conservative Party is perceived by many as having historically maintained a sceptical relationship towards development issues and many of the campaign groups that promote them.

This risk was recognized by the Conservatives when in opposition, and was a strong driver behind the decision to commit to the 0.7% of GDP target for development assistance demanded by most campaign groups. Yet there remains deep-seated suspicion among large sections of the development advocacy community. Any moves away from a strict separation between development and national policy, with development policy firmly leading on Africa-related issues, risk further alienating campaigners and threatening constructive relations between them and the government.

One driver of such a breach in relations is the current government's desire to utilize development assistance to support FCO operations where they are in support of development objectives.<sup>16</sup> To some this might seem non-contentious, as it would be in line with the internationally agreed rules for ODA as set out by the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). In fact an increasing, though still low, proportion of the United Kingdom's ODA has been channelled through government departments other than DFID in recent years.<sup>17</sup> However, a highly visible symbol of the previous government's development-led view of Africa, and of the separation of development goals and national interests, remains evident in the separate compounds, structures and staffing of DFID and the FCO in many countries. Any rationalization of staffing, infrastructure and, most importantly, budgets between the FCO and DFID risks being interpreted as a cynical money-grabbing exercise and return to a pre-1997 agenda. In addition, the United Kingdom is considered a leader in the field of development practice. The OECD DAC rules are quite tightly delineated, but ultimately rely on participants following their spirit as well as their letter. Any perceived retreat by the United Kingdom from abiding by this spirit may encourage a relaxation of standards that could ultimately leave the DAC rules meaningless. However, there are also compelling reasons why such measures might work in the interests both of development and of the UK national interest.

After some significant progress, Western efforts to support development in much of Africa have arguably reached the limits of what they can achieve without reference to national interest. One of the clear lessons of the failure by many Western states to fulfil commitments related to development was that policy-makers from donor governments lacked a sustained, clearly defined self-interest in doing so given public ambivalence over aid. In its absence other more immediately politically compelling priorities took precedence.

Yet, as many of those who most forcefully advocate the importance of development assistance are aware, developed countries have a very real self-interest in supporting the emergence of wealthy and influential African states. Certainly, as increasing numbers of African states have the opportunity to become wealthier, the United Kingdom should benefit from the support it has offered, which means ensuring such development is sustained but also recognized by the recipient.<sup>18</sup>

More immediately, while relations on the ground between the FCO and DFID are usually far more constructive than many critics suggest, there have been instances when they appeared close to

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<sup>16</sup> See Letter to the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee from Simon Fraser, Permanent Under-Secretary of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2 December 2010, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmselect/cmaff/writev/572/13.htm>.

<sup>17</sup> In 2009 out of a total ODA budget of £6,425 million, it was £932 million, £142 million of which was through the FCO. DFID Statistics on International Development 2010, <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/hub/>. The amount had increased to £273 million a year by November 2010, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmselect/cmaff/writev/572/13.htm>.

<sup>18</sup> There is some truth in the argument that the United Kingdom will benefit from the existence of wealthier, more stable countries regardless of awareness of its role. However, other donors will inevitably seek to extract advantage by claiming credit, and this should not be at the expense of the United Kingdom.

representing two different sovereign entities with mutually opposing policies.<sup>19</sup> This is intolerable when the same taxpayers fund both. There is evidence too that African policy-makers resent engagement by the UK government on a different basis from that of their other international partners. In much of Africa, sovereignty is a highly sensitive issue. Even when development assistance is clearly desired, it is not always enthusiastically welcomed, particularly from a former colonial power. The formal definition of the bilateral relationship as being development-led can be counterproductive to the effectiveness of aid, particularly if it is taken to imply a lesser respect for the sovereignty of the recipient state. This in turn can legitimize those who seek to subvert development assistance from the United Kingdom or even diminish awareness that UK aid is significant.<sup>20</sup>

So the principal task for those who seek to enshrine development as a continued priority for UK governments in a way that is supported by taxpayers is to accept that ODA is to be less confined to DFID, and that all civil servants need to work together much more flexibly to promote UK interests as well as development objectives across Africa.

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<sup>19</sup> The Conservative Party, 'One World Conservatism. A Conservative Agenda for International Development', Policy Green Paper No. 11, 2009.

<sup>20</sup> There are frustrations among some informed observers that certain African governments do not appreciate how much aid they are receiving from the UK as it is often delivered in a low-profile manner. By contrast, for example, a Chinese representative will personally deliver a symbolic notification of China's aid to recipient African governments. In this way even smaller amounts of aid can deliver more influence and respect.

**Box 2: Comparing UK engagement in Africa with that of other countries**

In the wake of the global financial crisis, and given the changing international order, many countries are re-evaluating how they conduct foreign policy, including in Africa. Two distinct trends are apparent. Some established ‘Western’ powers are rationalizing their engagement and cutting posts. Canada has refocused its policy towards the Americas and away from Africa for some years. After recently failing in its bid for an elected seat on the UN Security Council, it is now considering further cuts to embassies across Africa.<sup>a</sup> France continues to try to reduce the high staffing levels of its embassies abroad, including in Africa, and is studying other countries’ reductions carefully. The Netherlands and Sweden are carrying out significant reviews that will see posts closed in Africa. There are exceptions. Norway has no plans to cut its network. The United States has no plans to close embassies, and will in theory see a modest increase in resourcing for its Africa Bureau over coming years.<sup>b</sup> Japan will be maintaining funding at current levels for the foreseeable future.<sup>c</sup>

Emerging powers are increasing their diplomatic footprint and level of engagement across Africa as they seek new markets, access to resources and allies across a continent that has recently seen record growth. China’s and India’s re-engagement has been well documented. South Africa has been broadening its diplomatic engagement across Africa for over a decade now. Brazil has considerably enhanced its diplomatic presence across Africa, and Turkey is aiming to expand its presence to 27 embassies. Other countries such as Iran, Venezuela and Indonesia are seeking to increase their level of diplomatic activity in pursuit of political support and access to resources and markets.<sup>1</sup> New non-state or multilateral partners are also appearing. The European Union is an influential actor within Africa, and may become more so as the European External Action Service develops. Sub-national actors such as Scotland and Wales have also sought new engagements across Africa in recent years.<sup>1</sup> African diasporas are becoming more organized around the world to lobby or influence policy in their countries of origin. Overall the changing balance appears to some extent to mirror the changing balance of international affairs.

**Table 1: Foreign sovereign embassies in sub-Saharan Africa**

Rank	Country	Embassies	Rank	Country	Embassies
1	USA	46	11	Saudi Arabia	21
2	Russia	45		Egypt	21
3	China	42		India	21
4	France	38		Netherlands	21
5	South Africa	37	12	Switzerland	19
6	Nigeria	34		Italy	19
	Germany	34	13	Canada	18
7	Brazil	31	14	Argentina	17
8	Japan	27		Belgium	17
9	UK	26	15	Libya	16
10	Turkey	23			
	Spain	23			

Source: Foreign ministry websites

<sup>a</sup> G. York, ‘Ottawa Mulls Closing Some Embassies in Africa’, The Globe & Mail, 10 November 2010, <http://m.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/ottawa-mulls-closing-some-embassies-in-africa/article1792611/?service=mobile>.

<sup>b</sup> The United States opened an embassy in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea, in 2006 in response to industry lobbying.

<sup>c</sup> Private interviews.

## THE EMERGENCE OF MICRO POSTS

The idea of micro posts is still developing in UK government thinking, with their use in Africa to some extent pioneering emerging global practice. There is no internationally accepted definition, but the concept of small posts more generally can imply a diplomatic mission with anything from one to six diplomats (a definition that would cover the majority of UK posts across Africa).<sup>21</sup> For the British government, however, a micro post has come to mean a diplomatic post occupied by at most two UK diplomats (though additional locally engaged staff may be present). In the wake of the 2003 terrorist attack on its consulate in Istanbul, the United Kingdom became more averse to such posts for security reasons. However, the combination of austerity and advancing technology has brought micro posts back onto the agenda.

Some other countries are also considering their deployment. Sweden is the only other Western state actively contemplating as wide a use of one-person micro posts as the United Kingdom intends (although others are following the UK policy with great interest).<sup>22</sup> Norway has a single diplomat in Burundi, and Belgium one in Angola. Denmark has a single national in Niger (supported by 22 local staff), and a single diplomat in Zimbabwe attached to its embassy in Zambia. Spain staffs its posts in sub-Saharan Africa with two or three diplomats and also has a few one-person operations. Switzerland generally has two diplomats in its 21 missions in Africa, with single-diplomat micro posts in three countries.<sup>23</sup>

The reality is that given current funding constraints, as set against UK public expectations of maintaining a global diplomatic network, micro posts are likely to become increasingly common for British diplomatic engagement with large parts of Africa and beyond.<sup>24</sup> Currently the United Kingdom has six such sovereign posts: in Asmara (Eritrea), Bamako (Mali), Conakry (Guinea), Victoria (Seychelles), Windhoek (Namibia) and Gaborone (Botswana); and there are subordinate posts in Bujumbura (Burundi), Goma (DR Congo), Monrovia (Liberia) and Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire).<sup>25</sup> Such posts can be roughly divided into three categories:

- sovereign posts, e.g. Bamako;
- subordinate posts in the same country as the sovereign post managing it, e.g. Goma; and
- subordinate posts in a different country from the sovereign post managing it, e.g. Abidjan.

Micro posts, like any other diplomatic mission, do not exist in isolation, and receive a web of support for IT, visa issuing, consular services and certain financial and administrative functions, as well as medical and security advice, from other posts in the region.<sup>26</sup> Such a system is possible because of changes in technology and organization, but also requires new ways of working, as well as staffing. It is also important that the coherence of the wider network, and how such posts relate to each other, is constantly reappraised.<sup>27</sup>

Micro posts can work well and offer excellent value for money when the right diplomat is in place. The example set by UK diplomats in the existing micro posts listed above is generally positive.<sup>28</sup> The challenges that micro posts represent are recognized, with the security of staff being a key concern, as are the pressures that can come from being in such a sensitive position without ready

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<sup>21</sup> For interesting insights regarding micro posts in US diplomatic thinking see Keith Mines, 'A Horizontal Model for Transformational Diplomacy', *Foreign Service Journal*, March 2006, <http://www.afsa.org/fsj/mar06/transfordiplomacy.pdf>.

<sup>22</sup> The Netherlands is undergoing a comprehensive review of its network that may see embassies scaled back and closed, and is looking at the UK experience carefully.

<sup>23</sup> Interviews with foreign diplomats.

<sup>24</sup> The scale and speed of the United Kingdom's reduction are often overlooked. The UK High Commission in Zambia has gone from 25 to three staff in 10 years, with the prospect of further cuts to come. It is not uncommon for posts to be run with administration and programme annual budgets of less than £200,000.

<sup>25</sup> The definition is fluid in that additional DFID or other government staff may be present at some posts and not at others.

<sup>26</sup> One post can utilize support services from as many as six different embassies and offices. The Indian Ocean network linking into Africa is one such web that is seen as particularly efficient.

<sup>27</sup> The post in Mali, for instance, could usefully cover Niger and Mauritania as well.

<sup>28</sup> Chatham House researchers have tracked this development over some years.

access to colleagues.<sup>29</sup> Other challenges stem from the need to cover staff absence (for holiday or illness), the need to be exceptionally strategic when it comes to priorities for the countries covered, and the need to manage key relationships well – not just on critical bilateral issues but on more prosaic issues such as visa issuance.<sup>30</sup> The nature of local mobile telecommunications and internet provision becomes even more important. Good coordination with the embassies of other countries is also key, particularly with those of close allies, and collocation within the same building or compound can be useful for both security and coordination purposes.<sup>31</sup> There is a need for greater utilization of informal contacts and relationships, particularly with UK nationals who may be in a position to volunteer support or help with some important functions. The hard work of many honorary consuls already illustrates what is possible, and especially at a time of austerity their support will become ever more crucial.<sup>32</sup> A greater reliance on locally engaged staff is also important, although recognition of the political and other pressures they can suffer, even in relatively open societies, is essential.<sup>33</sup>

Most fundamental perhaps are the tough choices that must be made with regard to the priorities set by diplomats in a micro post when they are the only persons on the ground. This is not so much of a problem when the post is new and has been opened specifically as a micro post. However, when the micro post exists as a scaled-down larger post, then managing expectations, both in the country covered and in London, can be a real challenge. This is particularly the case as external (and indeed some internal) perceptions of FCO capacity can be highly unrealistic – partly as a legacy of the United Kingdom's status as a former colonial power and a permanent member of the UN Security Council and given its long-held ambition to 'punch above its weight' on the world stage. All of this reinforces the need to ensure heads of diplomatic missions are of sufficient seniority for the role, however strong the temptation to downgrade seniority requirements for ambassadorial posts for cost and other reasons. The danger is that it is the lone staff in such micro posts who could end up bearing the brunt of this increasingly yawning gap in expectations.

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<sup>29</sup> Diplomats in such posts are likely to receive a steady stream of other UK officials travelling through or visiting on official business, but the lack of a permanent presence of a colleague can be hard for single-diplomat posts.

<sup>30</sup> When UK staff at a micro post go on leave, some functions can be covered remotely from a neighbouring post or from London.

<sup>31</sup> Coordination is especially important where host governments would like to play off various embassies against one another.

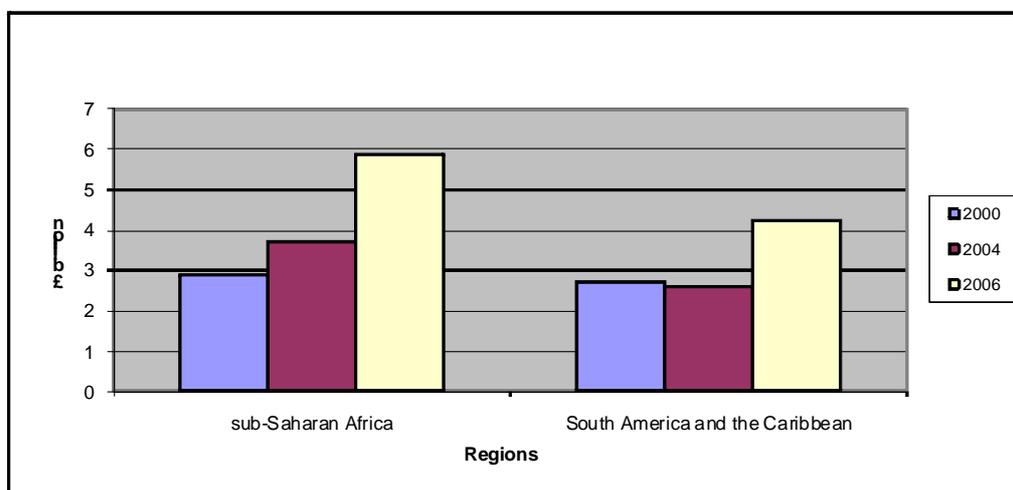
<sup>32</sup> Indeed, their use is being expanded, to Cape Verde, for instance.

<sup>33</sup> Foreign governments – even in relatively benign regimes – can find many ways of pressuring the local staff of British diplomatic missions when relations are strained, through their family or other routes.

## TRADE

As part of its 'Prosperity Agenda', the coalition government has made it clear that expanding trade and investment overseas is a priority. With regard to Africa this comes at a time when the role of the private sector in meeting development objectives is increasingly recognized.<sup>34</sup> Sub-Saharan Africa is one of the poorest regions of the world and accounted for only 3.5% of global trade in 2009. Until the late 1990s it accounted for a dwindling share of UK exports, and resources devoted to trade promotion were cut accordingly. Yet the region's international trade and imports from the United Kingdom, as well as the rate of growth in most African countries, have increased markedly over the past ten years. Despite this, the UK's emphasis on trade promotion with the largest African states has not kept pace accordingly. A comparison with South America and the Caribbean is instructive, as shown in Figure 1. UKTI has 17 offices in South America and the Caribbean, against nine in sub-Saharan Africa, even though UK exports to the 20 top sub-Saharan African states are almost 30% higher than to the top 20 South American and Caribbean importers.

**Figure 1: UK exports – top 20 countries by value, sub-Saharan Africa and South America & Caribbean**



Source: UKTI

Interviews with British business people suggest that, while there is a need to be realistic regarding the capacity of the United Kingdom's reduced diplomatic network, there are things diplomats can do to promote trade interests at no cost and in the absence of greater support from UKTI. Suggestions include increasing awareness among businesses that are, or may be considering, investing in African states, and advertising more widely that diplomats are prepared to talk by phone and/or meet British business people in-country or in London, to offer their expertise on the political and investment climate. This awareness could be promoted via UKTI, or perhaps more effectively via FCO websites and in the course of general domestic outreach by the FCO. At present it is too often unclear to UK businesses, either individually or as a whole, whether or not the government wishes them to invest into the challenging environment in some African states.<sup>35</sup> Clear signals and leadership from the government here are key and do not need costly initiatives.

<sup>34</sup> Trade promotion must be seen to take place within a framework that entrenches good ethical practice and is fully joined up with other aspects of UK policy regarding governance reform and anti-corruption efforts. Occasionally, given the understandable desire of ministers and others to promote trade, official speeches do not always appear to give sufficient recognition to this broader picture.

<sup>35</sup> Private conversations.

The second, and longer-term, project for diplomats is to cultivate self-sustaining UK business-focused groups related to a country or region. These can do much to act as force multipliers for a proactive ambassador. For some countries, heads of mission can engage with UK-based diaspora groups to promote British business interests. UKTI could play a useful role if it simply pooled and distributed information regarding the considerable number of business-relevant events on Africa that take place in the United Kingdom each month.<sup>36</sup> By combining this with a stronger awareness of which UK companies have indicated interest in opportunities across Africa and in what fields, UKTI could usefully connect governmental and non-governmental entities to promote British business in Africa.

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<sup>36</sup> Non-governmental analysis, research and discussion of Africa is one area where the UK remains a world leader.

## ENGAGING WITH DIASPORA GROUPS

While media and policy capacity on Africa has declined in the United Kingdom, there exists considerable and growing expertise among UK-based communities originating in various African countries. Their political, business and development links are increasingly important factors in a number of bilateral relations.<sup>37</sup> Clearly, utilizing such expertise is complex and challenging, yet already there is a nascent interaction between diaspora groups and the UK policy community. For instance, the Zimbabwe Diaspora Focus Group (ZDFG) was established as a result of approaches to the FCO by UK-based Zimbabweans who felt their experience and considerable expertise could help inform British policy. The group is carefully constructed to take account of and represent as many shades of opinion as possible within the Zimbabwe diaspora, and ZDFG representatives regularly meet FCO officials to discuss progress in the country and the role of the United Kingdom. The initiative has had a number of positive impacts, including more widely informed UK interventions on issues relating to Zimbabwe.

Such an exchange has many mutual advantages. Individuals within diaspora communities often maintain a strong interest in contemporary political and social developments, with a nuanced understanding, and can enjoy strong connections with their country of origin. Many individuals and groups from such communities dedicate a significant amount of their own time to supporting and encouraging development and political reform in their country of origin. There is often much overlap with UK policy in this regard.

There are obvious challenges too. Different diaspora groups clearly have very different profiles, and it is important to recognize that there are many different reasons, both positive and negative, for immigration to the UK. Given that so many states in Africa suffer from poor governance or conflict, it is clear that a significant proportion of African diaspora communities in the UK have arrived as a result of negative experiences in their country of origin, and these understandably continue to colour their perceptions both of their country of origin and of engagement with officialdom generally. Also, in common with the UK population in general, there are inevitably individuals and groups who have agendas that may be more or less hidden and that run counter, or may even be harmful, to UK interests.<sup>38</sup>

Trust, good faith and matching expectations can take considerable investment in time, energy and reputations and remain fragile, yet they are of critical importance. Communication can be difficult when different cultural outlooks engage. The ZDFG experience, as well as that of other less structured engagements, illustrates the challenges for such processes. There is the question of the composition of such groups and the extent to which they are designed to be representative, consultative, formal or merely an informal source of expertise. Selection, governance and public profile are important considerations, often by definition (and quite properly) beyond the control of the FCO. Civil servants are obviously acting in a professional capacity, but representatives on the diaspora side are normally engaging as volunteers, often dependent upon the initiative and leadership of a few key individuals. This can be critical if these individuals have risked their reputation among others who are sceptical or downright hostile to engagement with officialdom.

For all these reasons and more, there is an understandable reluctance on the part of government to expend too much energy on such engagements, and an aversion to formalizing them. Yet UK-based African diasporas are becoming ever more important actors in defining and mediating bilateral relations, particularly as official British capacity thins. In the case of some countries, such as Nigeria and perhaps Somalia, it could be argued that the bulk of bilateral exchange now occurs far beyond the scope of official relations. Influential individuals and groups, often with business and/ or political connections in both the United Kingdom and their country of origin, can increasingly deliver policy and broker relations in a de-formalizing world in a way in which foreign ministries cannot, and their role is likely to grow. This brings a new set of risks and opportunities into which technology can offer limited insights. It is hard to see how a responsible FCO can remain

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<sup>37</sup> For some deeper perspectives on these and related issues see David Styan, 'The Security of Africans Beyond Borders: Migration, Remittances and London's Transnational Entrepreneurs', *International Affairs*, vol. 83, no. 6, November 2007, pp. 1171–91.

<sup>38</sup> The funding of insurgent groups in Somalia by some members of the UK Somali diaspora and the involvement of members of the Nigerian diaspora in Nigeria-based financial fraud are just two examples.

aloof from this process, and a more strategic engagement is clearly in the interest of the United Kingdom.

### **Box 3: The FCO, the British Council and the BBC World Service in Africa**

The relationship between the FCO, the British Council and the BBC World Service is sensitive but important. Both the World Service and the British Council receive significant funding from the FCO's budget, and have historically been described by civil servants as being part of the 'FCO Family', although they remain operationally independent (see footnote 4 above). From 2014 the World Service will be funded from the BBC licence fee, and the British Council now receives the majority of its funding from non-FCO sources. In early 2011 the World Service announced 16% cuts, including the termination of Portuguese transmissions to Africa (broadcast since the 1930s) at 9 pm on 25 March 2011. The FCO will retain a degree of influence over the future strategic direction of the World Service, although the extent of this influence and how it will work has not been finalized.<sup>a</sup> On the other hand the British Council, which announced 25% cuts, remains an executive non-departmental public body (NDPB) under the ultimate responsibility of the Foreign Secretary.

The roles of the World Service and the British Council are of course global, but of particular interest in Africa because the 'soft power' public diplomacy competition for hearts and minds across the continent has intensified over the past few years. The nature of this competition deserves a longer paper in itself but, in crude terms, a number of cultural and media actors working on behalf of various state or ideological interests are entering the arena, or expanding their activities, across Africa. These range from the more editorially independent, if nationally mandated, services such as France 24, Deutsche Welle or Al Jazeera, to the more nationally motivated such as Russia Today, Press TV (Iran) and China Central Television, to some US and other news networks with an ideological agenda. Alongside these news actors are cultural institutions competing with the British Council such as the Confucius Institute, Goethe Institute and French Cultural Institute. Increasing internet access is crowding the market further.

Few, if any, of these media outlets have the credibility and hard-won reputation for independence of the BBC World Service, which deserves to be protected, even while the World Service diminishes in size and prominence.<sup>b</sup> However, this should not preclude a debate regarding how the United Kingdom projects itself, nor on how to counter messages actively hostile to British values or interests. The British Council, with offices in 20 different sub-Saharan African countries, has a key role to play here.<sup>c</sup> It has recently tended to distance itself further from wider government priorities and identification.<sup>d</sup> However, this has arguably not been a success in African countries where, understandably enough, the British Council continues to be perceived as part of the FCO family and an extension of British foreign policy. Given the growing need to compete in a crowded information market with limited resources, it might be better to accept that the British Council's strength is as a potentially highly effective tool of UK soft power projection and to integrate it more fully with embassy functions and strategies. This is in fact already happening in some countries such as Namibia and Uganda, with positive effect. Alternatively, the £160 million of funding it still receives from the FCO could be very usefully redirected to other FCO priorities. Senior British Council staff, in arguing the organization's status as an NGO, point out that this funding is just a small part of its £800 million budget.<sup>e</sup>

<sup>a</sup> This uncertainty remains an ongoing reputational risk for both parties.

<sup>b</sup> The cutting of the BBC World Service's Portuguese Africa service leaves one Commonwealth country, Mozambique, and an increasingly important regional actor, Angola, with no provision. This is at a time when the FCO is seeking to engage Angola more closely, and when the FCO's 2011–2015 Business Plan commits it to enhancing the impact of both the British Council and the World Service.

<sup>c</sup> The British Council reopened in the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2010, after an eighteen-year closure. There are compelling business reasons for it to open in a similar fashion in Angola.

<sup>d</sup> Private interviews. Senior staff still refer incorrectly to the British Council as an NGO.

<sup>e</sup> Private interviews. This insistence that the British Council is entirely separate from the government is arguably inconsistent with British Council reliance on the FCO and the rest of the UK network for many of its operations.

## FCO STAFFING AND MANAGEMENT

There are clearly many aspects of working for the FCO that are highly rewarding, but wider public perceptions that diplomatic life is routinely glamorous, particularly as it relates to more challenging postings, are now, in many ways thankfully, very far from the truth. Smaller posts, and micro posts in particular, require exceptionally proficient, motivated, adaptive and resilient staff prepared to work with little reference to traditional working hours. Even in the best-run organizations finding individuals with such skills is not easy; moreover, staff need to be prepared to live in challenging conditions where their families may not easily be accommodated. The FCO historically has a reputation for recruiting and developing talented people, yet like many other organizations it experiences human-resources and management challenges. Unfortunately the impact of these shortcomings upon staff is heightened when the demands and expectations placed upon civil servants are so great, and over the past few years demands have grown considerably.

A greater dependency upon a decreasing number of high-calibre individuals, particularly to serve in smaller posts and micro posts, requires a highly sensitive recruitment, management and human-resources capacity that successfully balances the needs of individuals against the needs of the organization. The FCO may or may not be better served than most organizations in this regard, but it needs to be far better still. It also needs to communicate better to the wider public the realities of life for diplomats in challenging posts, particularly in Africa, and to consistently demonstrate an internal recognition of the value of such work; and it must not hesitate to reward its staff accordingly – bearing in mind that financial reward should not be the principal motivating factor for such staff.

Against this, of course, there is a danger, as in any other organization, that staff may not perform as they should. With a reduced network that includes micro posts, the damage that might be caused to the United Kingdom's interests by any one individual is commensurately higher. This places an additional onus on internal systems and, again given that resources are stretched, an intelligent and imaginative approach will be required.<sup>39</sup> Clearly, in many cases damaging behaviour will be less likely if individuals feel looked after and part of a team. Thankfully, and with some exceptions, the FCO has a generally good story to tell in this regard, but, particularly when budgets are tight, ensuring that all staff are aware of UK priorities and how their role relates to them will become ever more important.

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<sup>39</sup> This is also one argument against political appointees as heads of mission, as the management support required, and the lifestyle demands of some appointees, can be a damaging drain on resources.

## CONCLUSION: GETTING POLICY INTO PRACTICE

There is a new discourse coming out of the British government regarding the importance of forging modern, mutually rewarding bilateral relationships with African states. However, this is taking place in the context of further cuts to FCO capacity and an emerging National Security Council apparatus in which many important but complex African issues appear to fit with uncertainty.<sup>40</sup> DFID is undergoing deep reform and reorientation, and the Conservative-led coalition government lacks (for now) a party-political hinterland of interest in Africa of the type that encouraged consistent focus for the previous Labour government.<sup>41</sup> Indeed there is an atmosphere of reluctant engagement between the current government and advocacy groups that might at any time give way to hostility. Given uncertainty as to how a refreshing rhetoric of mutual respect and emphasis on private-sector-led growth by UK ministers can be backed up by action, it is tempting to believe that, while Africa's situation as a whole may continue to improve, the United Kingdom will not benefit as much as it should.

Yet there are positive developments. The UK is generally well served by its diplomats in Africa, and many of them are establishing innovative practices that could contribute to establishing a diplomatic network which maximizes the advantages of being small yet agile and influential. Combined with a greater culture of co-location and joint working between departments and better transfer of skills between the FCO, DFID, the Ministry of Defence and other parts of the government, including the British Council, as well as a more imaginative use of UK nationals and informal help (including honorary consuls), a far more efficient team could emerge, even at current reduced costs. Examples of this – such as the Sudan Unit and Stabilization Unit, both bringing together civil servants from several different departments – demonstrate how successful this approach can be.

Trade is an area where there should be clear advantages for the United Kingdom, but where institutional resistance and budget constraints within the FCO, particularly UKTI, will need to be overcome. During the current period of austerity the investment required for this is unlikely to be forthcoming, although it need not be great. In the meantime certain small measures can be implemented at no real cost in order to enhance visibility, simply by better outreach to businesses that would appreciate contacts in-country.

The United Kingdom benefits from a considerable resource in its African diasporas, too often considered problematic. Many UK citizens of African origin and UK residents with dual nationality or strong ongoing connections within Africa could contribute to a more nuanced and influential set of bilateral and regional relations. To date there has been insufficient understanding as to how to manage these relations in a constructive and sustainable way. But it is inevitable that many diaspora groups in the United Kingdom will play an ever larger role in bilateral relations. The key challenge for the FCO is whether it wishes to help shape the process, or merely watch it unfold.

Finally, under conditions in which many of the United Kingdom's allies in Europe and beyond are looking to rationalize their operations abroad, including in Africa, burden-sharing looks ever more compelling as a way to maintain influence, particularly within the European Union, but also among Commonwealth members. There are political problems stemming from differences between aspects of many countries' policies towards Africa and, in the case of Europe, from ideological obstacles within government.<sup>42</sup> There are also complex bureaucratic hurdles in terms of systems, language and confidentiality issues.<sup>43</sup> However, efforts are already under way to collaborate more closely with France; and for all its problems, working through the European External Action Service offers potential advantages given that the European Union remains by far the biggest donor to and trade partner with Africa.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> However, the decision of the NSC to prioritize South Africa as an emerging power is welcome.

<sup>41</sup> With the possible exception of Zimbabwe.

<sup>42</sup> There is, for instance, a compound for diplomatic posts from all EU members present in Juba, Southern Sudan. The only member to have placed its building outside this compound is the United Kingdom.

<sup>43</sup> However, many of these issues also feature in attempts to make FCO and DFID operations compatible.

<sup>44</sup> See, for example, Anthony Chafer and Gordon Cumming, 'Punching Below Their Weight? Critical Reflections on Anglo-French Cooperation in Africa', Report, 28 June 2010, Portsmouth University,

Choosing and charting a course through all these issues, like so many other aspects of political decision-making, requires strong agenda-setting, tough choices and pragmatic leadership. Civil servants can do so much, but ultimately it is up to elected officials to provide the strong direction required. On Africa there are some positive signs that the lessons from the mistakes of the previous administration have been heeded; but among welcome new ideas, tangible policy improvements are still hard to discern, and many of the previous strengths risk being ignored or discarded amid ongoing reforms across the FCO, DFID and the Cabinet Office. The Foreign Secretary's determination to preserve for himself the role of strategic planning, or 'grand strategy', appears hugely ambitious and unprecedented in the modern era. This is all taking place against longer-term uncertainties over the extent to which the FCO, on Africa as elsewhere, is capable of fighting its case in Whitehall for sufficient funding and continued relevance. This is risky for the United Kingdom's reputation globally, and a crisis in Africa that exposes the shortcomings of such a stretched network could conceivably force a 'South of Suez' withdrawal that would call into question the United Kingdom's permanent position on the UN Security Council and international standing generally.

There are reasons for optimism, not least the resilience in the face of austerity apparent in many parts of the FCO Africa Directorate. Yet a greater pragmatic imagination and willingness to work with new partners, both in the form of the United Kingdom's diaspora communities and through established European and Commonwealth partners, will also be required. Africa is unlikely ever to be considered a top priority region for the United Kingdom, but greater focus is required if the UK is to capitalize upon its considerable remaining influence in Africa in the pursuit of British interests.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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