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A Biblical Perspective on Official Development Assistance

Whilst international development policy is more than programming, the ODA budget causes most controversy. Debates over the direct trade-off with other spending pressures can leave little space for considered discussion of its purpose. The Bible can offer important and relevant insights for the future of UK development policy[1].

ODA Explainer

What the money enables and who spends it

ODA is "Spending that promotes the economic development and welfare of developing countries." (OECD)

ODA budgets enable the following:

- **Low Income Country access to concessional finance (inc grants).** World Bank, IMF, Regional Development Banks, UN and Development Finance institutions including British International Investment.
- **'Global Public Goods'** ODA enables grants and concessional finance (for public and private sector) on global or country initiatives on e.g. climate, biodiversity, disease control, disaster response and resilience, labour standards. Budget goes to global institutions, civil society, academic research, investment facilities.
- **In-country programmes relating to the Sustainable Development Goals** E.g. Includes economic development, health programmes, girls' education, water/sanitation, conflict and peacebuilding. Can include technical expertise related to business environment and global standards. Delivered through government institutions, civil society and private contractors or multilaterals depending on the context.
- **Bilateral Co-operation** e.g. organised crime, transnational illicit finance, law enforcement. Often focused on technical advice. Delivered through implementing companies, multi-lateral agencies or civil society.

The UN adopted the 0.7%/GNI ODA target in 1970, which was given prominence by the Brandt Commission of 1980, initiated by Robert McNamara, (World Bank President). He feared that massive inequalities between North and South prevented global co-operation.[2] In the UK, 1997 marked a major shift through the establishment of a Cabinet-level Department for International Development. This led to a decade of global momentum and UK leadership. In 2005, the UK's G8 Presidency prompted ODA uplifts, notably the EU committing to 0.7% by 2015. Despite the financial crisis, the UK met 0.7%/GNI in 2013. In 2020, COVID prompted the reduction to 0.5% and in February 2025 it was decreased to 0.3%.[3]

1 The International Development Committee has an open enquiry on this subject. Future of UK aid

2 Sir Edward Heath was a Commissioner from the UK. Archbishop Runcie wrote in support of the Commission's findings. The Brandt Report—a Christian Reaction | IDS Bulletin

3 USAID was abolished in January 2025. The US had previously accounted for c. 30% of global ODA. France, Germany, Switzerland, Netherlands and Sweden have reduced their ODA budgets.

The Church has played an important role in the UK's provision of ODA. Several influential development organisations, including Oxfam and Save the Children, have church-based origins. The tradition of church support for international projects from the nineteenth century, often through missionary structures, created a foundation for vocal church support for ODA, most notably through the Jubilee 2000 and Make Poverty History campaigns. Political leaders who have championed ODA include those who acknowledge a faith-inspired worldview.[4]

Three Biblical Principles: Solidarity, Stewardship and Trust

1. Solidarity with all people who all bear God's image

All people are defined first in relation to God and created in his image (Genesis 1:27). This overarching Christian principle gives everyone innate value, regardless of treatment by political authority or their belief.[5] Policies that uphold this principle are in everyone's interest. For Christians, the image of God is marred by the suffering of anybody. For citizens, states that do not consciously uphold the innate value of humanity may start to make more arbitrary decisions about the value of different people. That is not to say that the global population has the same rights or access to resources as domestic citizens, but policies that uphold the principle of innate worth can have a real and symbolic impact. ODA is such a policy. Countering violence against women and girls demonstrates that people are not defined by the way they are treated. Extending primary health care and education to communities in conflict affected countries shows that innate worth should not be dictated by circumstance.[6] A robust debate about such values and principles in public policy decisions is a sign of a healthy democracy. Political debate should not only broker different interests but should also deliberate what is 'lawful' and 'good'.

Human solidarity is relational - people flourish or fail together. God's commandments matter for collective groups as much as for individuals. In the Old Testament the collective life was set out in the covenant between God and his people (Genesis 17:1-8). In the New Testament, followers of Christ were called to model a new community as part of the church (Acts 2:42-47). Both covenants recognised that collective flourishing needed to take place in smaller communities, but the ultimate vision is of a world where all nations flourish together. Disciples are also called to live prophetically in the world – modelling collective flourishing in different contexts as they work alongside Christ towards the ultimate future of the renewal of all things.[7] Families and smaller groups might be able to live prophetically towards this future through inter-personal relationships. However, as communities extend beyond inter-personal interactions, collective flourishing depends on laws and structures that govern the use of power.[8]

2. Stewardship of power for the benefit of all

The ultimate future depicted in the Bible depends on the servant leadership of Christ - the use of his power for the benefit of all. This is what creates a vibrant, life

4 Gordon Brown: I should have been more forthright about faith.

5 This Judeo-Christian teaching is central to the human rights discourse (as Tom Holland writes in Dominion. Dai Woolridge centred his contribution to the National Parliamentary Prayer Breakfast in July 2025 on 'Imago Dei' the phrase used as shorthand for 'made in the image of God'. In 'Being Human, Rowan Williams explains how it relates to different aspects of what it means to be a 'person'.

6 It is important to note, however, that ODA is not always used in ways that does honour 'personhood and dignity' and there is a very active debate on how interventions could uphold this in the way they are delivered. For example, Podcast: Dignity in development - Institute of Development Studies

7 Tom Wright's interpretation of the calling of Christ to his disciples, as expounded in Romans 8, set out in 'Surprised by Hope'

8 For example, Deuteronomy 18, Ezekiel 34, Jeremiah 23 and Isaiah 10 exhort authorities to pursue justice and righteousness and warn judgement for those who oppress the poor.

giving and dynamic place where there is reciprocity and justice and the natural world flourishes. Isaiah 2:1-5 describes the future 'mountain of the Lord' where people would 'walk in his paths'. The Mosaic law in the Old Testament reveals what 'his paths' mean for social and economic relationships. Whilst the context may have changed since Biblical times, the core drivers of human behaviour remain. In particular, the universal human tendency to hoard the benefits of power and wealth (described in the Old Testament as 'coveting') will always present a major obstacle to collective flourishing.[9] Coveting leads to exploitation of people and over-exploitation of the natural world. As Pope Francis explained, the social and environmental crises are interdependent. (Encyclical, 'Laudato Si, Care for our Common Home').[10] Caution against disregarding nature is part of the Mosaic Law, reflecting the responsibility for the stewardship of all creation from Genesis 1:28.[11] Ways of preventing 'coveting' reflect three principles, all relevant to the global economy and to the role of ODA.

- *'Gleaning'* - enabling opportunity. This asks those with assets not to exploit them to the limits for their own benefit in order that the poor can make a living[12]. ODA-foregone revenue from OECD Governments, enables concessional finance for investment and public services for countries where access to capital markets is prohibitive. IMF emergency facilities during COVID relied on bilateral ODA. Development programmes support employment opportunities and access to financial services, such as through innovations like MPesa.[13] 'Gleaning' is also relevant to the use of natural resources – decisions by those with greater assets have a significant impact on the opportunities of the poorest.[14]

- *Fairness in transactions* - Fair treatment under the law, and fair terms for credit and employment run through Old and New Testament teachings.[15] *"Look, the wages you withheld from the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you."*

9 Walter Brueggemann in 'Poverty in the Promised Land refers to this as 'covetousness' – i.e.. that the commandment not to 'covet' goes beyond neighbourly envy and refers to systemic over consumption.

10 "We are not faced with two crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather one complex crisis which is both social and environmental" Laudato si' (24 May 2015)

11 For example, the instruction to let the land lie fallow was for the benefit of both people and animals. Exodus 23 v 10 *"but in the seventh year you must let it rest and lie fallow, so that the poor among your people may eat from the field and the wild animals may consume what they leave. Do the same with your vineyard and olive grove."* In Faith in the public square, Rowan Williams describes the natural world as a canvas that reflects the health of human interactions. Jeremiah 12: 4 *'Because those who live in it are wicked the animals and birds have perished'.*

12 Leviticus 19 v. 9-10 *"When you reap the harvest of your land, you are not to reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You must not strip your vineyard bare or gather its fallen grapes. Leave them for the poor and the foreigner. I am the LORD your God."*

13 MPesa began in 2007 as a UK funded pilot project with Safaricom and Vodafone that could enable people to access banking services through mobile phones and SMS. It now has 34 million Kenyan users. Inside M-Pesa's Journey: An Idea That Changed the Way Africa Moves Money - Today Africa

14 Campaign for climate justice - Christian Aid

15 Leviticus 19: 35-37 *"Do not use dishonest standards when measuring length, weight or quantity. [36]Use honest scales and honest weights, an honest ephah[a] and an honest hin"* Deuteronomy 24: 10-15: *When you make a loan of any kind to your neighbour, do not go into their house to get what is offered to you as a pledge. [11]Stay outside and let the neighbour to whom you are making the loan bring the pledge out to you. [12]If the neighbour is poor, do not go to sleep with their pledge in your possession. [13]Return their cloak by sunset so that your neighbour may sleep in it. Then they will thank you, and it will be regarded as a righteous act in the sight of the Lord your God. [14]Do not take advantage of a hired worker who is poor and needy, whether that worker is a fellow Israelite or a foreigner residing in one of your towns. [15]Pay them their wages each day before sunset, because they are poor and are counting on it. Otherwise, they may cry to the Lord against you, and you will be guilty of sin."*

(James 5:4) UK ODA has consistently supported improved terms for industrial and agricultural workers and taken action against modern slavery[16]. Support for democratic institutions, justice and the rule of law have been hallmarks of UK ODA, echoing the Mosaic injunctions to rulers to 'judge fairly and not pervert justice.'[17]

- *'Jubilee'* – a periodic 'reset' to avoid entrenched poverty. The concept in Leviticus 25:1-13 was for the restoration of original property rights every 50 years. 'Jubilee' was a central narrative for debt cancellation in the 2000s and is again being used in relation to high indebtedness.[18] In the current context, as Christian Aid argues, there is a case for much wider concept of 'jubilee' – a 'reset' of mainstream financial and economic structures that are leading to widening inequality and ecological degradation globally.[19] ODA may have a role to play, but economic trends in richer countries require a new narrative around justice and fairness that speaks to all who are excluded from economic benefits.

3. Relationships based on Trust

The Biblical vision of a future community built through mutual trust and reciprocity is relevant for the conduct of international relations. A shared commitment to the flourishing of both partners is language often used by Ministers in bilateral visits. ODA is often seen as zero sum – either benefitting the UK or only benefitting other countries. Neither framing reflects its potential for the health of the relationship. Another way to view ODA is as a 'gift offered in trust that it will be used for the common good' which, according to Rowan Williams, is an essential hallmark of a covenant community.[20] The level of trust is based on experience of how gifts are used. High-handed treatment (such as poorly managed programme closures) damages partnership. Whilst 'trust' might seem ephemeral, it can have real world impact.[21] ODA offers a platform for robust exchange and collaboration. It can be used for focusing mutual attention on issues of shared concern – whether the wellbeing of vulnerable groups or addressing a joint problem such as transnational criminality. Seeking 'trust' is does not mean naivety nor careless financial management, after all Christ cautioned his followers to be 'wise as serpents, innocent as doves' (Matthew 10: 16).

ODA in support of mutual flourishing

- 2000 White Paper on Trade argued that the UK benefits from better trading terms for poorest countries.
- Disease resistance: ODA led to a malaria vaccine and near eradication of polio. ODA response to Ebola informed COVID response.
- Extractives: Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative – framework including private companies, governments, multi-laterals, civil society and community groups seed-funded by UK ODA now benefits all in the supply chain.

16 DFID Economic Development Strategy: prosperity, poverty and meeting global challenges

17 Deuteronomy 1:15-17.

18 Governments paying more in debt interest than on health and education .campaigners argue this is due to currency fluctuations, COVID, war in Europe and climate shocks Asks are set out in Jubilee and Justice: Reclaiming Hope Through Ecological Debt Remission - Laudato Si' Action Platform

19 Christian Aid response to Financing for Development Conference

20 Faith in the public square

21 Moazzam Malik, former Director General from FCDO wrote about the importance of trust in international relations and the role of ODA. The future of the UK's development offer

Conclusion

Allocating public resources for international co-operation will always be a matter of principle. It is unlikely that many countries will ever 'graduate' or that richer countries consider they can 'afford to be generous'. ODA reports reveal impressive numbers of lives enhanced, but statistics become irrelevant if the core purpose of ODA is disputed[22]. These three Biblical principles offer valuable insights: Upholding the innate worth of the vulnerable can reinforce a core democratic principle; stewardship of power for the benefit of all offers a rich narrative for change, and building trust in international relationships can help all parties.

With these in mind, politicians can:

- Recognise that the UK's stewardship of global economic and financial influence has a significant impact on the poor, with or without ODA.
- Evaluate policy choices with regards to whether they uphold human dignity and contribute to building trust.
- Ask for the perspective of the poorest and most vulnerable on policy decisions.
- Avoid discussing ODA in isolation from wider international policy priorities.

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22 The Independent Commission for Aid Impact regularly reviews the impact of aid and other examples are quoted in Government documents including Annual Reports. The 2023 International Development Strategy Update included specific examples of 63m people protected from malaria and 33,000 jobs created in South Africa from one project alone.

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