

Stephen Twigg's talk at Chester University 7 October 2016



This occasion arose from a suggestion made by Chris Matheson MP, that he could invite fellow North-West MP to provide a talk about the work of the Commons Select Committee for International Development – on the understanding that we could promise a sizeable audience! The evening was chaired by Gill Miller, Programme Leader International Development Studies at the University.

Stephen Twigg is Labour MP for Liverpool West Derby and chairs the Parliamentary Committee which oversees the Dept of International Development. He has been Chair since 2015 and, like other Chairs, is elected by the whole House of Commons. It was a new area of interest for him and a learning curve, although he had been working for Amnesty International. He said that the present time is quite “lumpy” for Global Development and with many challenges. There were many explanations for Brexit but there seemed a significant sense of people wanting focus more on the UK than elsewhere. This was very sad when global needs were great with refugees in particular.

He said that it was good that the Labour Government had set up a Department for International Development and not to let it be subservient to Trade or Foreign Office. The 0.7% target for a country to give to aid was very important, and it was good that the UK had put this figure in legislation, with cross-party support. We were one of only 6 countries (UK, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Luxembourg and United Arab Emirates) that had reached this target which was established by the UN in 1970 as the amount needed lift all countries to a level where they would not need aid.

The Committee was made up of Conservative and Labour MPs in proportion to numbers in the Commons plus one SNP MP. They scrutinised the work of DFID and other Government policies affecting overseas development and have duty to look at value for money. They conduct specific enquiries into countries and issues. Countries have included Syria, Nigeria, Yemen, DR of Congo. Issues have included the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Allocation of resources, and Education. He said that the SDGs had succeeded the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which achieved much in health - particularly certain diseases - education and reducing hunger, by their end date of 2015. The SDGs were much wider in scope and applied to all countries including the UK! The challenge was great especially in reducing poverty and inequality. He said that the UK had been very positive about SDGs and pro-active in their preparation; but had since gone cool and there seemed to be no commitment to domestic implementation.

Other areas of the Committee's work had been:

1. **Syrian Refugees:** the UK had helped with the refugee crisis in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey; but seemed unwilling to open our own doors. The Committee wanted to ensure that the UK had a hospitality and re-settlement programme and they endorsed the call for us to take 3000 unaccompanied children. They also looked at the position of separated families. The Government eventually agreed to take 3000 unaccompanied children. There was such a great need for a political settlement in Syria.
2. **Yemen:** he said that this was the forgotten war! The UK were doing some good on the ground: but it was not good that the UK was supplying arms to Saudi Arabia with the likelihood that some were used against Yemen with civilian casualties. The majority on his Committee was that the arms sales should be reviewed as it seemed that there was a violation of international law. Stephen Twigg had written to Boris Johnson asking for this to be done and that meanwhile the arms sales should be suspended with focus on aid to Yemen.
3. **SDGs and Education:** (Goal 4 of SDGs) Good training of teachers was essential for good education. But there was a decline in aid money spent on education. The start was to ensure that all primary age children had good quality education. He was concerned about the private sector providing cheap education in Nigeria. The education enquiry would run for some time.

Stephen Twigg said that he was very concerned that there seemed to be more focus on using the aid budget to encourage UK industry and UK trade. He was concerned that the focus was moving away from the key area of poverty reduction which should be the main focus of aid. Priti Patel, the current Secretary of State for International Development, had not previously been a strong supporter of overseas aid. The Government needed to ensure that the SDG programme was considered in all areas of Government.

Stephen Twigg then spoke about **Engagement with Civil Society**. He said that politicians could do only so much and it was essential that citizens and academics were fully engaged in International Development and aid: particularly with the growth in right wing populism – there was a real need for a renewal of the kind of interest such as that generated by Jubilee 2000, Gleneagles 2005, etc. He was encouraged to hear of the activities of the Forum (unique in his experience) and would urge us to keep on with the good work.

Poverty in the UK needed to be addressed alongside poverty abroad. The SDGs covered both. The majority of UK citizens probably supported aid to the poorest countries. It was also important that civil society in countries overseas should also be involved in poverty reduction and other SDG areas including tax avoidance. Governments generally needed to be held to account. The voice of the diaspora was important; e.g. Yemen people living in the UK

He said that quite a lot of UK aid went via the EU, so we needed to be watchful of the spending intentions post-Brexit.

Questions

In response to a question about follow up of Committee reports Stephen Twigg said that DFID responded to the Committee's reports and his Committee followed up if not satisfied with the response. He felt that NGOs also needed to push Government on implementing the SDGs. Cross-Party pressure on the Government to take unaccompanied child refugees had been successful.

He also thought that Churches and the faith organisations needed to more pro-active in this area.

He shared concerns voiced about cutbacks in funding for Development Education – and its removal from education syllabuses.

He shared concerns voiced about anti—aid bias in parts of the media, citing in particular an ongoing campaign in the Mail on Sunday.

He thought that there was a shift in aid towards North Africa.

Terry Green, CWDF Chair, closed the meeting by thanking Stephen Twigg for giving his time and providing very useful insights into the work of his Committee and its interaction with DfID. He also thanked Chris Matheson for making the introduction. With an audience of around 100 this had also proved to be an important opportunity to spread the word about the activities and interests of CWDF and its member groups.