

## After previously making good progress, the Department for International Development now faces an uphill battle reaching our foreign aid target

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At the close of 2011, *British Politics and Policy* at LSE asked our contributors for their thoughts and predictions for 2012. [Avery Hancock](#) looks ahead at the challenges now facing the Department for International Development, and its Secretary of State, Andrew Mitchell, to get our 0.7% of GDP target for foreign aid spending into legislation during this parliament.



The coalition government's decision to ring-fence foreign aid spending in the 2010 comprehensive spending review sparked fierce debate as to why the Department for International Development (along with the NHS) should be protected from swingeing cuts across government. Increased aid spending appeared to be part of David Cameron's strategy to project a more compassionate image of the Conservatives and aligned nicely with the wishes of their Lib Dem coalition partners. On numerous occasions the government has stated its intention to commit the UK to spending 0.7 per cent of its GNP on aid, in line with the UN target set in 1970 (yes, you read that correctly), by enshrining it in legislation.

The government was well on its way to becoming the first country to reach the target, spending an estimated 0.56 per cent of GNP in 2011. At the current rate, and with the economic slowdown, aid would have exceeded 0.7 per cent by 2013. In his autumn statement Chancellor George Osborne admitted such spending 'could not be justified' and the government needed to adjust plans so as to not 'overshoot the target.' For 2012-13 then, the planned budget of £8.55 billion will be reduced to just over £8 billion, with the savings directed towards youth projects (in the UK, not abroad) and capital projects. Even with reductions a number of Conservative MPs consider aid a luxury ill afforded in an economic downturn.

Secretary of State for International Development Andrew Mitchell will face an uphill battle of to get the 0.7 per cent legislation before parliament this session. The Conservative head of DFID is reportedly being blocked by David Cameron- whose MPs could rebel on such a vote- and is believed to be courting sympathetic Labour party members (It was Labour that set up DFID in 1997 as an independent department committed solely to global poverty reduction). Mitchell will not be helped by a [recent report](#) from the independent aid watchdog ICIA- set up under his watch- which places the department on an 'amber-red' alert for its approach to tackling fraud and corruption in its spending. As the department increases the proportion of its budget earmarked for fragile and conflict-affected countries to 30 per cent, this exposure will only become more salient.



Andrew Mitchell in Kenya (Credit: DFID Creative Commons BY)

In order to win support from the coalition and importantly, the public, Mitchell will have to show DFID is serious about value for money. Already the department has threatened to cut off funding to a number of UN agencies (including the FAO and UENSCO) if they don't reform; currently 40 per cent of the UK's development assistance is channelled through the UN institutions. Mitchell also made good on his promise to cut the number of countries receiving aid. Russia, China, and (controversially) Iraq will no longer receive

assistance, as they are comfortably 'middle-income' states. But Niger and Cambodia, who have also faced the axe, are certainly not. Ethiopia will top the list of recipient countries with Bangladesh, Afghanistan, and Pakistan close behind. India occupied the top spot for a number of years, an uncomfortable position for a country that boasts better growth than the UK; aid will be frozen, not discontinued, on the grounds that the country is home to more poor people than any other country on earth.

In 2012 we will see the [Development Awareness Fund](#) scrapped, seen by some as a marketing and communications gimmick meant to trumpet the department's successes. But with public attitudes most likely hardening against aid it seems more important than ever that the public have a picture of global poverty and how UK aid has, and can make a difference.