Case Study

UK Aid Match

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Introduction

UK Aid Match has been developed by the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO, formerly the United Kingdom Department for International Development) in partnership with Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) (ICAI, 2019). It launched in 2013, intending to bring "charities, British people and the UK government together to change the lives of some of the world's poorest and most vulnerable people" (UK Aid Match, n.d.). This funding mechanism is used in connection with UK's Official Development Assistance (ODA) and aims to give UK citizens a greater say in aid allocation, by matching public appeals with FCDO funding (Verbrugge & Huyse, 2020).

The problem

Between 2013 and 2020, the UK government committed to spend 0.7% of its Gross National Income (GNI) on ODA – a target set by the United Nations (OECD, n.d.). In 2014, the UK became the first G8 country to achieve this target (Clarke, 2018). The rationale behind this spending is that "there is no distinction between reducing poverty, tackling global challenges and serving our national interest – all are inextricably linked" (Greening & Osborne, 2015, p. 4). However, an analysis of UK policies shows that political consensus on international aid is low, with 47% of UK citizens considering that "most aid is wasted" (DFID, 2010, p. 2). In light of this background, the UK government needed a new strategy to reduce national discontent with ODA whilst tackling global challenges and supporting national interests.

The solution

UK Aid Match represents a crucial element of the UK Aid strategy to ensure "public trust and legitimacy of DFID's development and humanitarian work" (ICAI, 2019, p. 15). The rationale behind this mechanism is to increase public engagement with international development issues by letting UK citizens have a voice in how international aid is spent. In addition, it collects additional funds for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UK Aid Match, 2021a). Under the motto "Leave No One Behind", UK Aid Match invests in projects that specifically focus on achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UK Aid Match, 2021a). To do so, FCDO matches every pound collected by UK citizens for selected projects (Verbrugge & Huyse, 2020). For the period 2013 - 2023, UK Aid Match has committed to grant £290 million to selected projects (ICAI, 2019). More specifically, over the last six years, the fund has supported 111 UK charities and NGOs to implement projects in 38 countries, helping approximately 25 million people around the world (FCDO & Sugg, 2020).

Mechanism design

The funding mechanism is quite simple: when a UK citizen donates £1 to a UK Aid Match Charity Appeal, the UK government contributes to the project with an additional pound, for a maximum government contribution of £2 million per project (UK Aid Match, 2021a). The projects supported by UK Aid Match must operate within one of the 50 countries with the lowest Human Development Index or in countries that the UK government considers fragile (UK Aid Match, 2021d). Despite the international dimension of the projects supported, the mechanism applies only to UK-registered CSOs operating in target countries.

The application process comprises a two-stage process. Firstly, CSOs submit a concept note presenting a project to FCDO. The assessment criteria evaluate two main components: 1) a communications and appeal strategy detailing how the project will be communicated and how donations will be raised; and

2) a technical project proposal detailing how the funding will be spent (UK Aid Match, 2021b). Secondly, following FCDO approval, those who have been shortlisted must send a complete application that, as in the first phase, gives equal weighting to the communications and appeal strategy and the technical project proposal (UK Aid Match, 2021b). At this stage, organisations can already receive provisional funding contingent upon the completion of a diligence assessment. CSOs can initiate their public appeal, which may last a maximum of three months and must collect a minimum of £100,000 from UK citizens. From this moment, the selected organisations receive ongoing support from UK Aid Match, with a wide range of resources available on the website to successfully implement the project. These resources include, but are not limited to, training on communication for the public appeal and guidance on preparing a log frame as well as an informative podcast that provides advice on reaching new audiences during the appeal, amongst other useful topics (UK Aid Match, 2021e).
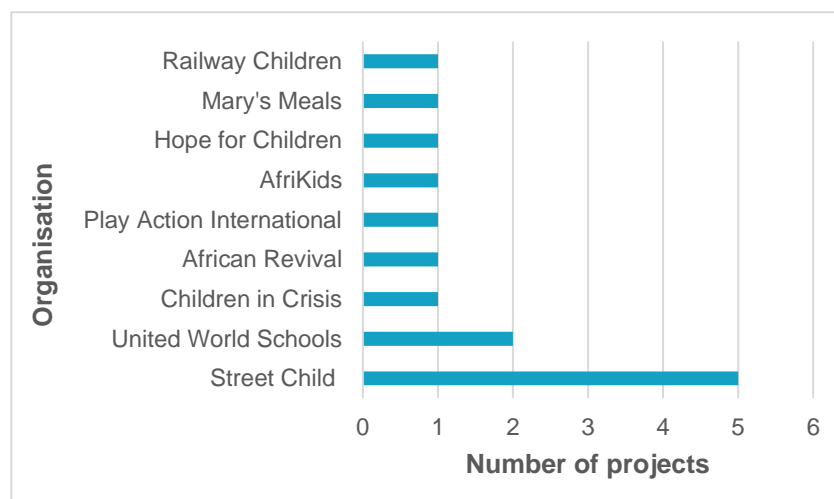
Given the rationale of the funding mechanism, transparency plays a fundamental role. The selected CSOs must report back at least three times during the project period to "share stories and milestones from their project to the public, which in turn increases transparency in how the UK aid budget is spent" (UK Aid Match, 2021g, para. 1). Moreover, to ensure transparency and knowledge sharing, external actors get involved in the process: since 2018, the fund manager has been MannonDaniels, a global consultancy firm working in collaboration with Education Development Trust (EDT), Oxford Policy Management (OPM), Royal Tropical Institute (KIT), and the Social Change Agency (SCA) (MannonDaniels, 2021). Their involvement plays a critical role during the public appeals, with the function of increasing the engagement of UK citizens to ensure that the selected organisations are able to reach their fundraising targets of £100,000 (MannonDaniels, 2021).

UK Aid Match education projects

While UK Aid Match projects are not restricted to specific sectors, since 1997, the UK government has generally prioritised education, health, and humanitarian action (ICAI, 2019). Moreover, even though projects related to any SDG are encouraged, every call for applications is dedicated to specific thematic issues. The latest UK Aid Match round, which closed on April 2021, focused on girls' education, together with the longer-term impact of COVID-19 and ending preventable deaths by tackling malnutrition or malaria (UK Aid Match, 2021b; 2021f). The UK Aid Match (2021c) portfolio publicly presents all projects, which can be filtered by status, sector and/ or location. Since the launch of UK Aid Match, there have been 14 projects (of which six remain active) in education operated by nine organisations, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

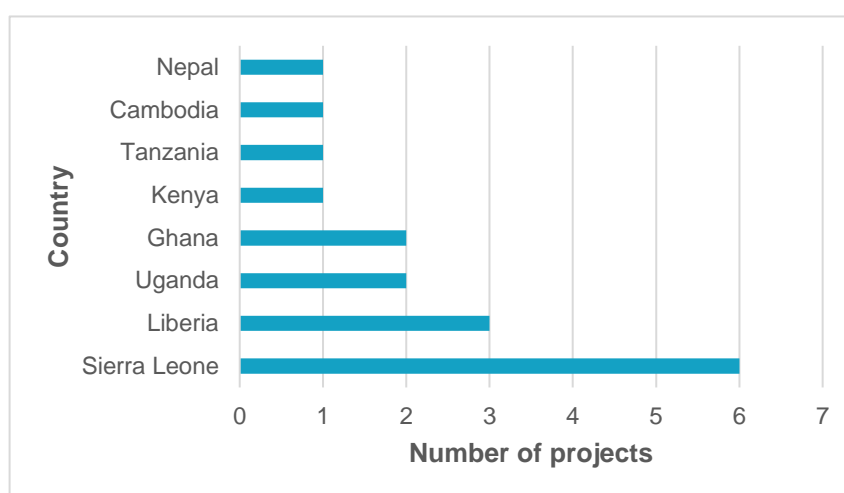*Number of education projects supported by UK Aid Match per organisation (2013-2022)*

Source: UK Aid Match, 2021c.

Figure 1 shows that Street Child has received the greatest support from UK Aid Match, with five education projects carried out through this funding mechanism. Other CSOs have implemented only one or two projects. These education projects span eight different countries across Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia, as presented in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2

Location of education projects supported by UK Aid Match (2013-2022)

Source: UK Aid Match, 2021c.

Sierra Leone was the first country to have an education project implemented through UK Aid Match. It has also witnessed the largest number of UK Aid Match education projects, which mirrors the UK foreign policy in this geographic area. The UK government is Sierra Leone's largest bilateral donor and has already intervened in the country during the civil war in 1992 and the Ebola outbreak in 2014 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Sierra Leone, 2021). According to DFID (2020, p. 2), "ensuring we do not have to intervene a third time is a key objective of the UK's investment in Sierra Leone".

UK Aid Match: some critical reflections

Through the mobilisation of additional resources from UK citizens, UK Aid Match contributes to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda objectives and to raising UK public engagement in ODA. However, given its general scope, two cumulative conditions are necessary for systematically applying this funding mechanism to the education sector. On the one hand, calls for applications to the UK Aid Match should be regularly dedicated to education to reduce the funding gap for the achievement of SDG4. On the other hand, while the idea of attracting additional money from UK citizens is promising, further research on the effectiveness of the UK Aid Match in collecting additional funding is necessary. Currently, there is insufficient research on the extent to which this mechanism increases the donation for a specific project compared to what UK citizens would have been donating without the UK Aid Match (ICAI, 2019). Similarly, there is no data on a potential transfer effect, namely, on the decision to donate to a project supported by UK Aid Match instead of other projects (ICAI, 2019).

In addition to the need for a systematic focus on education, and for providing more data to determine the effectiveness and efficiency of this mechanism, UK Aid Match has two potential pitfalls. On the one hand, as mentioned in the UK aid strategy, this fund risks becoming an instrument of soft power by prioritising the UK world's influence and interests over educational needs (Greening & Osborne, 2015). More precisely, as the example of the UK government's support in Sierra Leone illustrates, this strategy risks instrumentalising education and the partnership with NGOs at the service of the UK governance agenda (Molenaers, Gagiano and Renard, 2015). On the other hand, despite the establishment of the mechanism within the UK partnership with CSOs and the support of UK Aid Match to increase the

effectiveness of the organisations selected, it emerges that there is a limited variety of CSOs supported. More specifically, within the education sector, almost one-third of the grants go to the same CSO.

In other words, despite its innovative mechanism, UK Aid Match risks becoming a top-down approach, formulated and implemented in the Global North, limited to a few popular charities from the UK, and detached from the local context and needs. As a consequence, a potential replication of UK Aid Match in other contexts requires further attention to the following two questions: *who* the organisations supported are and *why* they are supported. Addressing these questions requires the consideration of alternative approaches to making this mechanism more inclusive and detached from traditional power dynamics.

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