

How the Coalition will deliver fairness in International Development – Chris White MP,
member of the International Development Select Committee

Fairness has quickly become one of the key tests that will define this Coalition Government. People want to know that during the difficult economic times our country faces, we are all sharing an appropriate level of the financial burden, that the Government is not being inefficient or ineffective with public money and that funds are being targeted appropriately.

This has presented an interesting challenge for international development, as its fairness must be “double facing”. Not only must spending on international development appear fair to people at home, it must also appear to be fair in the wider global context.

There has been some criticism made that international development spending is not “fair” when put in the context of spending reductions in other sensitive areas such as policing. I do not believe that is the case. If we invest in international development and help to create a more sustainable global future, then we will reduce the levels of international crime, migration and conflict which negatively affect Britain. Tackling problems at their source, rather than letting them develop and grow until we are forced into action is a sound use of public money and more cost-effective in the long-term.

A belief in the power of aid and development is shared by much of the public. We have only to look at many thousands of successful international development charities or the big set piece events such as Comic Relief to see it in action. However, part of fairness is allowing people to see where their money is being spent and whether it is being spent effectively.

This is why I am supportive of the efforts to create a new Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI), which will be up and running by June 2011. By ensuring that our aid is rigorously checked and that people can see clearly that public money is being used effectively, government can keep its side of the “fairness” deal whilst helping to reinforce public confidence on matters of international development.

While the commission will play a big role in ensuring high levels of accountability, it cannot cover everything and so the Department for International Development (DFID) has a duty to make sure that internal levels of auditing, accountability and transparency are high. Andrew Mitchell and his team must keep officials on their toes and stress the importance of generating maximum value for money. This will not only mean that public funds are spent wisely, but it will also mean that as much funding as possible go towards effective poverty reducing projects.

There is also a need for global fairness and I believe that good progress is being made on that front.

Firstly, it is important that we honour our commitment to spend 0.7% of Gross National Income (GNI) on international development by 2013. If developed countries, continue to break their promises, then not only will they be accused of failing their duty with regards to the poorest nations, but trust between states will be severely damaged.

While there is an obligation on recipients to spend the money effectively and DFID should press states to be more open in the way that they spend funds, Britain also has a duty to meet its commitments in regards to funding. I am glad that the Coalition has recognised the need for this kind of fairness.

Secondly, the public and world at large, expects that public funding should go towards those countries most in need. For that reason I was pleased that the Coalition took the tough, early decision to stop sending aid to Russia and China, as well as the announcement of full reviews in all Bilateral and Multilateral aid spending.

Though it is important to support middle-income countries such as Brazil, China, India and Russia where many of the poorest people in the world now live, we should do this through other methods such as the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD). In general, bi lateral aid should be targeted at the poorest nations with the aim of helping those countries that are struggling most in order to achieve the Millennium Development Goals.

This will ensure that there is a sense of global fairness surrounding our development spending.

I am glad that we are having a serious debate about fairness across the political agenda, whether it is about public services, infrastructure or international development. People have a right to expect that their politicians will act with fairness when they making decisions. On international development, I believe the Coalition has acted with a sense of fairness and I hope that it will continue to do so in the years ahead.