

Archbishop Justin writes for the Financial Times on the importance of Britain maintaining its foreign aid budget.

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A promise to the poor is particularly sacred. These words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu are impossible to ignore as the UK government plans to break our promises to the world's poorest people.

Reducing our overseas aid commitment at this critical time is morally wrong, politically foolish and an act of national self-harm. Its impact will be felt not only in refugee camps and conflict zones but also much closer to home.

I have visited areas of intense poverty and ravaged by battles and seen UK aid working efficiently and effectively. Last year, I was in Beni in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where people have been battered by disease and vicious militias. We travelled by well-guarded convoy to an Ebola treatment centre supported by UK aid working with local partners. In the midst of such darkness and despair, the hope and comfort provided by these efforts was unmistakable.

Directly as a result of Covid-19, up to 150m people will fall into absolute poverty. This will cause unimaginable suffering.

British aid efforts increase the UK's soft power. They stabilise and support people in areas of instability. They strengthen the rules-based international order. They are a testimony to a country based in an ethical system, steeped in the parable of the Good Samaritan, which urges us to help those who are not our obvious neighbours. If the teller of that parable, Jesus Christ, were to visit one of the thousands of projects support by UK aid in places of profound need, he would recognise it immediately.

These are promises we have made. Now we are breaking them. In June, Prime Minister Boris Johnson insisted that spending 0.7 per cent of gross national income on overseas aid "remains our commitment". In their 2019 manifesto, his Conservative party promised to "proudly maintain our commitment to spend 0.7 per cent of GNI on development and do more to help countries receiving aid become self-sufficient".

The argument that these pre-pandemic manifesto commitments have been overtaken does not hold water. When Mr Johnson made that promise in June, the economic impact of the virus was clear. We now know, too, that the saving of roughly £4bn will be dwarfed by spending in other areas.

The 0.7 per cent target was a great moral success initiated by Labour, completed under the coalition and maintained by the Tories. It held through the years of austerity. It was something of which we could be truly proud.

But the commitment was not just a matter of national pride. It was one of national interest. Foreign aid provides the stability needed for trade and economic development and opens the way for a global Britain post-Brexit. It demonstrates that we are a reliable partner and friend, not seeking to conquer but to work alongside those in need.

Aid also enables us to play a key role in distributing the Covid-19 vaccine that we have been helping to develop. Coronavirus knows nothing about borders, economics or side-effects. If it exists in one country, it will spread to others. As a senior member of the World Health Organization said to me, "If we do not conquer the virus everywhere, we do not conquer it anywhere."

The virus is not only a terrible threat to our health, but to the economic future of every country. While the pandemic rages it will be harder to overcome conflict and climate change, reform the international economy, and deal with innumerable other problems.

This is why the 0.7 per cent target is supported by past prime ministers and by British people around the world.

The reduction is said to be temporary, but that is a slippery word; income tax was introduced by William Pitt the Younger in the 18th century as temporary. Waiting for a better time to be virtuous reminds me of St Augustine's prayer for God to make him chaste, but not yet.

The government must rethink. I have every sympathy for the enormous challenges it faces that it could never have expected. If it insists on making this cut, then I urge that this be time-limited to one year.

It is never easy to do right in international development. What counts is doing it when it is tough, as we have done so proudly and so efficiently in the past. The foreign secretary, Dominic Raab, insists we are still giving lots. Perhaps, but to those whose projects are cut off — and to our reputation as trustworthy — that is not the point.

There would be no shame in stepping back and re-establishing the 0.7 per cent target. It would demonstrate our leadership to the world, show we are genuinely global Britain, deepen our international interests and increase our soft power.

We have made a promise to the world's poorest people. In their interest — and our own — we must keep it.

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