

Occasional Paper

Bargaining with the Green City in the Sun: An Appraisal of UK Engagement in Kenya

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Published in 2023 by the Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies.



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RUSI Occasional Paper, August 2023. ISSN 2397-0286 (Online).

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RUSI is a registered charity (No. 210639)



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Executive Summary

Since 2016, successive UK governments have spoken of an outward looking, collaborative and influential post-Brexit Britain. A series of speeches and policy statements have emphasised the need to pursue future prosperity through overseas engagements, building on investments in diplomacy, trade, defence and development aid. In March 2021, the UK government published its Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy, reiterating similar themes and referencing eastern Africa as a theatre where the UK should maintain or increase its focus.

Against this backdrop, a RUSI research team examined how the UK has deployed its development, defence and diplomacy toolkit in the region since 2015. The project, entitled ‘Furthering Global Britain? Reviewing the Foreign Policy Effect of UK Engagement in East Africa’, identified factors that help and hinder the UK in the pursuit of its (erstwhile) ‘Global Britain’ agenda across Kenya, Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan. It tested common assertions about the effects of Brexit, reductions in the UK aid budget, and the merger of two government departments – the Department for International Development (DFID) and the Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) – alongside any wider enablers and constraints.

This paper sets out findings on the UK’s activities in Kenya from 2015 to 2022. As a vital commercial hub, regular recipient of British ‘aid-for-trade’ programmes, and one of the few countries name-checked in both the Integrated Review and the International Development Strategy, Kenya remains an enduring priority for UK foreign policy. Grounded in shared history, language, economics and security, the relationship was recently formalised by a new Strategic Partnership (2020–25), reflecting a raft of bilateral interests spanning ‘mutual prosperity’, stability, sustainable development, global leadership on climate issues, and ‘productive alliances’ at an individual and institutional level. Similarly, Nairobi occupies a crucial role in UK military thinking, with the 2021 Defence Command Paper outlining the possibility of an ‘enhanced presence’, and value of long-running cooperation.

Clearly, UK engagement has delivered significant results, not least improvements in Kenya’s social infrastructure, public services and humanitarian outcomes. Adept programming, contextual knowledge and networking via the British High Commission (BHC) have enabled successful collaboration with other donors and contributed towards – or driven – numerous examples of positive change, from educational reforms to electoral monitoring.

But the realities of this longstanding relationship are complex, with historical ties offering both benefit and burden. Despite close alignment, political and cultural familiarity should not necessarily be conflated with trust, influence or (automatic) diplomatic capital. Fallout from electoral violence in 2013 and subsequent International Criminal Court charges exposed how quickly claims of neo-colonialism can be instrumentalised against British interference. Concurrently, Kenya's economic independence, burgeoning donor landscape and role in countering Al-Shabaab has weakened the broader resonance of Western conditionalities. Beneath tropes of democratisation and 'open societies', UK interventions on governance issues seem more measured, with a commensurate shift in focus from civil society organisations (CSOs) to State House. While not universal – the BHC continues to work alongside and fund civic groups, and support peacebuilding, accountability and police reform – much of the coverage is increasingly technical and incremental, in part to avoid infringing on elite preferences.

Brexit did not automatically impact day-to-day operations. The UK's development expertise, longstanding relationships, economic weight and strategic investments still provide clout among international donors. But the transition has deprived UK officials of valuable strategic cover on areas of policy dialogue that are sensitive to push unilaterally as the former colonial power. Diminishing aid budgets, the DFID/FCO merger and Kenya's own bargaining power also speak to a wider shift in the logic and terms of bilateral engagement. 'Global Britain' discourse may have emphasised the centrality of trade and investment, but there is a risk this transactional relationship could precipitate open competition with larger players like China and the US. At the same time, a lack of resourcing appears to undermine the feasibility of long-term reforms, particularly if practitioners working on electoral support, for instance, cannot follow up or consolidate inherently protracted cultural, normative and structural changes. While specific focus areas, including education, appear insulated from recent funding cuts, key elements of the 'Global Britain' agenda have become increasingly difficult to deliver, creating confusion over the hierarchy of UK priorities. Without clarity, the UK's role as a major commercial and political voice in Kenya, and wider role as a developmental heavyweight, may therefore be called into question.

Introduction

In the wake of the June 2016 Brexit vote, then UK foreign secretary Boris Johnson repeatedly referred to ‘Global Britain’. While the phrase attracted widespread commentary, much of it quizzical or critical, it was an attempt to frame the UK as a proactive, outward-facing country.¹

In March 2021, the UK government published the Integrated Review of Defence, Security, Development and Foreign Policy. Within a more competitive global context, the document reiterated familiar ‘Global Britain’ themes. It heralded a proactive role in global affairs, greater bilateral and multilateral cooperation, and better integration of foreign policy, defence, trade, and international development efforts. In Africa, the UK would forge partnerships and pursue shared goals such as prosperity, democracy and security, and in Kenya specifically, ‘invest further in regional stability, mov[e] towards closer defence cooperation’ and ‘deliver the UK–Kenya Strategic Partnership’.²

Two years later, the Integrated Review Refresh provided an update of the government’s policy priorities amid a fast-changing global context.³ Although no longer using the language of ‘Global Britain’, the key themes remained consistent, with Africa flagged as an arena for deepening relationships and engagement, and greater emphasis placed on leveraging international development alongside ‘the full range of UK strengths and expertise’.⁴

Against this backdrop, the RUSI project ‘Furthering Global Britain? Reviewing the Foreign Policy Effect of UK Engagement in East Africa’ examines how the UK has used development, defence and diplomacy to pursue the ‘Global Britain’ agenda in Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia and Sudan. It explores how far UK engagement has contributed to positive change in recipient countries, and whether this has helped to advance the national interest at a time of domestic and international change. The project considers whether structural shifts, including a reduced UK aid budget, Brexit and the creation of the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), have helped or hindered the ‘Global Britain’ agenda

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1. See, for example, HM Government, ‘Beyond Brexit: A Global Britain’, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/beyond-brexit-a-global-britain>>, accessed 23 February 2023; Mara Budgen, ‘Theresa May Launches a Global Britain: Her Brexit Speech in Full’, LifeGate, 17 January 2017.
 2. HM Government, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*, CP 403 (London: The Stationery Office, 2021), p. 63.
 3. HM Government, *Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a More Contested and Volatile World* (London: The Stationery Office, 2023).
 4. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

in the region, and identifies factors that enabled or constrained the UK’s influence and impact.

The research methodology entailed a review of selected academic and policy literature and, in the case of this paper, 48 semi-structured expert interviews conducted between November 2021 and January 2023 with a range of current and former government officials, staff from multilateral organisations, academics, and civil society and business figures (see Table 1). The intention is to provide an overview of UK engagement in each country over the seven-year period and to examine factors salient in driving significant outcomes, with particular reference to ‘positive’ outcome areas where British agency was considered to be important. While references to interviews have been omitted to maintain anonymity, quotations from interviews are used in the paper to demonstrate the complexities of UK–Kenyan bilateral relations and politics without referring to any individual person.

Table 1: Interview Breakdown

| Interview Type | Number |
|-----------------------------------|--------|
| Civil Society | |
| Academic | 10 |
| NGOs/think tanks | 16 |
| Multilateral Organisations | 1 |
| Government | |
| UK | 15 |
| Other | 6 |

Source: Author generated.

Chapter I provides background on UK–Kenya relations and summarises the UK’s major policy interests and main development and humanitarian, diplomatic and defence investments in recent years. Within this portfolio of work, Chapter II highlights examples of UK contributions to positive outcome areas before identifying key factors that have constrained or enabled UK action. Concluding analysis on these factors and project research questions is provided in Chapter III.

This paper is part of a series of publications which includes a capping paper that lays out the overall project methodology and greater detail on UK engagements across the region;⁵ four country case studies focusing on the UK’s work in

5. Simon Rynn and Michael Jones with Elijah Glantz, ‘Furthering Global Britain? An Overview of UK Development, Defence and Diplomatic Engagement in Eastern Africa’, RUSI Special Resources, November 2022.

Ethiopia,⁶ Sudan,⁷ Somalia⁸ and Kenya, and a further publication that synthesises the project's overall findings and recommendations.⁹

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6. Simon Rynn, 'On Shifting Ground: An Appraisal of UK Engagement in Ethiopia', *RUSI Occasional Papers* (February 2023).
 7. Simon Rynn and Michael Jones, 'Deal or No Deal? An Appraisal of UK Engagement in Sudan', *RUSI Occasional Papers* (June 2023).
 8. Michael Jones, 'Mired in Mogadishu: An Appraisal of UK Engagement in Somalia', *RUSI Occasional Papers* (June 2023).
 9. Simon Rynn and Michael Jones, 'Furthering Global Britain? Reviewing the Foreign Policy Effect of UK Engagement in East Africa', *RUSI Occasional Papers* (August 2023).

I. Background and Strategic Focus

Historically, the UK has played a significant role in Kenya. British military and commercial engagement grew over the late 19th century, subsuming territory into what would eventually become the East Africa Protectorate in 1895.¹⁰ A Colony of Kenya was created in 1920, with the indigenous population barred from cultivating coffee, occupying pasturage across the so-called ‘White Highlands’, or, until 1944, enjoying political representation.¹¹ Nationalist organisations began emerging from 1921, and during the 1952–60 ‘Mau Mau Revolt’, rebels primarily drawn from the Kikuyu community – the country’s largest ethnic group – mobilised against settler reservations and, increasingly, native loyalism. Although British officials responded with widespread killings, torture and mass detentions,¹² the shift from conventional counterinsurgency to ‘controlled decolonisation’¹³ led to various racial policies on land ownership, agriculture, pay and social segregation gradually being dismantled.

From the end of the crisis in 1960 to late 1963, the Kenya African Democratic Union (KADU) and the Kenya African National Union (KANU) engaged in talks culminating with a declaration of independence. Jomo Kenyatta, a political activist convicted and imprisoned for his alleged role in Mau Mau, led KANU to electoral victory after his release. As the country’s first prime minister and then president, Kenyatta fashioned an increasingly patrimonial state, vesting power in provincial bosses and ‘coalitions of individual Big Men’ at the expense of party structures,¹⁴ and leaving much of Kenya’s law enforcement, bureaucracy and governance systems ‘remarkably similar’ to those of the late colonial period.¹⁵

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10. Encyclopaedia Britannica, ‘British East Africa’, <<https://www.britannica.com/place/British-East-Africa>>, accessed 14 February 2023.
 11. Mai Hassan, *Regime Threats and State Solutions: Bureaucratic Loyalty and Embeddedness in Kenya*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 58.
 12. David Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged: Britain’s Dirty War in Kenya and End of Empire* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2005). According to the BBC, the Kenya Human Rights Commission claims that 90,000 people were ‘executed, tortured or maimed during the crackdown, and 160,000 were detained in appalling conditions’. See *BBC News*, ‘Mau Mau Uprising: Bloody History of Kenya Conflict’, 7 April 2011.
 13. Poppy Cullen, ‘“Kenya is No Doubt a Special Case”: British Policy Towards Kenya, 1960–1980’, unpublished thesis, Durham University, 2015, p. 11, <<http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/11180/>>, accessed on 10 February 2023.
 14. Nic Cheeseman, Karuti Kanyinga and Gabrielle Lynch, ‘The Political Economy of Kenya: Community, Clientelism and Class’, in Nic Cheeseman, Karuti Kanyinga and Gabrielle Lynch (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Kenyan Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 9.
 15. Cullen, ‘“Kenya is No Doubt a Special Case”’, p. 16. See also Hassan, *Regime Threats and State Solutions*; Nanjala Nyabola, ‘Why Kenyans are Protesting Police Brutality at Home and Abroad’, *Foreign Affairs*, 25 June 2020.

Despite popular and elite-level resentment across Kenya over past abuses, the UK was able to preserve influence in Nairobi, maintaining a ‘nuanced and negotiated relationship with multiple and sometimes competing priorities and abilities’.¹⁶ For instance, in the run up to independence, Whitehall supported KANU’s push to integrate the Northern Frontier District – a ‘closed region’ along the Somali border – into Kenya proper, irrespective of the preferences expressed by local inhabitants.¹⁷ The resulting ‘Shifta’ War – a four-year irredentist insurgency – saw Kenyatta’s regime lean heavily on British military tactics and (informal) security guarantees.¹⁸ Additionally, UK officials – among others – funded a series of land settlement schemes in the early 1960s under the rubric of ‘consensual decolonisation’,¹⁹ reinforcing ties to a domestic oligarchy ‘often adept at using the British relationship to [its] particular advantage’.²⁰ Though Kenyatta himself initially needed British officers to help coup-proof his position,²¹ he also proved assertive, leveraging the implicit threat of Asian immigration²² to wring further concessions out of London.²³ This dynamic only started changing in the mid-1970s as Whitehall retained close political and defence ties²⁴ but ‘encouraged an [independent] arms build-up ... and turn[ed] the Kenyans away from any potential reliance on direct British intervention’ due to its own budgetary constraints.²⁵

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16. Cullen, “Kenya is No Doubt a Special Case”, p. 263.
 17. Hannah Whittaker, ‘The Socio-Economic Dynamics of the *Shifta* Conflict in Kenya, c. 1963–8’, *Journal of African History* (Vol. 53, No. 3, November 2012), pp. 391–408. Notably, this was a reversal of past British policy, which saw ‘acquiescence towards Somali irredentism in northern Kenya’ form ‘part of a wider process of constitutional reform designed by the departing administration to weaken a KANU-led central government’. See Daniel Branch, ‘Violence, Decolonisation and the Cold War in Kenya’s North-Eastern Province, 1963–1978’, *Journal of Eastern African Studies* (Vol. 8, No. 4, 2014), p. 643.
 18. Elijah Odhiambo, ‘The Origins and Evolution of Anglo-Kenyan Military Diplomatic Relations Since 1963’, *Open Access Library Journal* (Vol. 8, e7801, September 2021); Branch, ‘Violence, Decolonisation and the Cold War in Kenya’s North-Eastern Province, 1963–1978’, p. 643.
 19. Gary Wasserman, *Politics of Decolonization: Kenya Europeans and the Land Issue 1960–1965* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 163.
 20. Cullen, “Kenya is No Doubt a Special Case”, p. 267.
 21. Evident, for instance, when British officers helped suppress a mutiny by Kenyan soldiers in 1964. See Odhiambo, ‘The Origins and Evolution of Anglo-Kenyan Military Diplomatic Relations Since 1963’, p. 10.
 22. Immigration ‘became one of the few issues in Kenya after independence which touched on British domestic politics’ as Kenyan Asians were not subject to controls prescribed by the 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Act, allowing them ‘ready access’ to the UK. Following Nairobi’s introduction of the 1967 Immigration Act and 1968 Trade Licensing Act – legislative expressions of ‘Africanisation’ – East African Asian migration to Britain increased significantly, exacerbating public anxiety about an uncontrollable ‘invasion’ and providing Kenyatta with a further ‘bargaining chip’ to cement his “special” position in British thinking’. See Cullen, “Kenya is No Doubt a Special Case”, pp. 173–81.
 23. Described by interviewees and outlined in Cullen, “Kenya is No Doubt a Special Case”.
 24. For instance, interviewees recalled how Kenya hosted military training facilities and a 250,000-strong British diaspora; functioned as a conduit to the wider region; and continued to benefit from UK funding and development assistance.
 25. Cullen, “Kenya is No Doubt a Special Case”, p. 217.

From 1978 to 2002, Kenya became steadily centralised²⁶ under Kenyatta's successor Daniel arap Moi, precipitating new, increasingly eclectic patterns of ethno-cronyism at the expense of Kikuyu elites.²⁷ While UK prime minister Margaret Thatcher tried to 'maintain the relationship but limit the costs',²⁸ Nairobi temporarily reoriented in favour of the US, 'offering America naval facilities and the use of Kenya's airfields' in return for \$27m of military assistance and \$50m in economic aid.²⁹ However, mounting concerns over corruption, violence and repression, and local resentment towards structural adjustment and 'foreign meddling', led to a deterioration in Kenyan-Western relations by the late 1980s.³⁰ At the same time, annual growth rates – previously averaging 3% GDP per capita – stalled, propelling a rise in poverty and social deprivation as the population boomed.³¹ These problems persisted despite a revival of multi-party politics in the 1990s,³² with Moi exploiting state power to amass private wealth,³³ and 'engineer[ing] ... grossly unjust conditions' during the 1992 and 1997 elections.³⁴ Only when Mwai Kibaki convincingly beat Moi's anointed successor to lead KANU, Uhuru Kenyatta, in 2002, did the economics start to change, facilitating a 'new, more diverse and arguably less rigid neo-patrimonial order' backed by both 'international neo-liberalism' and 'Chinese super-cycle investment'.³⁵

Amid moments of optimism, Kenya has experienced a fraught electoral history since the transition back to multiparty democracy. Although tempered by bloc voting and coalition-building,³⁶ ethnicity remained pronounced across the language and logic of local campaigning.³⁷ In the absence of 'strong class cleavages', issue-based corporate groups or political parties with organisational

26. Cheeseman, Kanyinga and Lynch, 'The Political Economy of Kenya'.

27. *Ibid.*

28. Cullen, "Kenya is No Doubt a Special Case", p. 262.

29. *Ibid.*, pp. 261–62.

30. Odhiambo, 'The Origins and Evolution of Anglo-Kenyan Military Diplomatic Relations Since 1963', p. 11.

31. Stefan Dercon, *Gambling on Development: Why Some Countries Win and Others Lose* (London: Hurst, 2022), p. 141.

32. David W Throup, 'Daniel Arap Moi and One Party Rule: 1978–1991', in Cheeseman, Kanyinga and Lynch (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Kenyan Politics*. Examples include: the Goldberg scandal, where elite cronies smuggling gold profited from a preferential exchange rate; and the Anglo Leasing scandal, which implicated a British firm in bribery to secure a contract to print passports. See Dercon, *Gambling on Development*, p. 143.

33. Xan Rice, 'The Looting of Kenya', *The Guardian*, 31 August 2007.

34. Stephen Brown, 'Authoritarian Leaders and Multiparty Elections in Africa: How Foreign Donors Help to Keep Kenya's Daniel arap Moi in Power', *Third World Quarterly* (Vol. 22, No. 5, October 2001), p. 726. See also Raymond Muhula, 'The Limits of Multi-Partyism (1992–2005)', in Cheeseman, Kanyinga and Lynch, *The Oxford Handbook of Kenyan Politics*.

35. Throup, 'Daniel Arap Moi and One Party Rule', p. 67.

36. Given Kenya's social heterogeneity, larger ethnic groups only comprise between 10% and 17% of the population. See Lars Kamer, 'Distribution of the Population of Kenya as of 2019, by Ethnic Group', Statista, 1 August 2022, <<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1199555/share-of-ethnic-groups-in-kenya/>>, accessed 15 February 2023.

37. Michael Jones, "'To Go Forward is Not to Arrive": Donor Support Amid Kenya's Elections', RUSI Newsbrief, 8 August 2022.

coherence and a consistent ideology, candidates tended to lean on ‘highly personalised patronage networks to effect mass mobilisation’.³⁸ This often generated a self-perpetuating cycle as ‘ethno-elites’ or ‘ethnic barons’ exploited land grievances and clientelism to secure votes, funnelling public resources towards their ‘own’. The ‘lived reality’ of these inequalities – perhaps best encapsulated by a 16-year difference in life expectancy between certain incumbent and opposition regions – appeared to confirm the ‘exclusionary nature of Kenyan politics’ and the value of ethnic solidarities in the public imagination.³⁹ As a result, the stakes and assumptions associated with elections became steadily defined in zero-sum terms, rendering the state an ‘arena of accumulation’, and ratcheting up the militarisation of ethno-centric competition.⁴⁰ In 1992 and 1997, for instance, Kalenjin militia – many affiliated with senior politicians – attacked Kikuyu in the Rift Valley to discourage voting.⁴¹ Larger-scale violence broke out during and after the 2007 ballot, leaving around 1,100 dead⁴² and 700,000 displaced. With imports bottled up in Mombasa, fuel prices across neighbouring Uganda and Rwanda more than doubled and ‘humanitarian assistance further afield in the eastern Congo (DRC) was disrupted for weeks’, exposing the regional implications of political turmoil in Kenya’s State House.⁴³

Against this backdrop, a new constitution was introduced in 2010 to dilute the inherent ‘winner-takes-all’ dynamic conditioning Kenya’s ‘imperial presidency’, creating a ‘50% plus one’ threshold for victory and devolving a proportion of executive power to 47 counties.⁴⁴ New judicial bodies such as the Supreme Court

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38. Nic Cheeseman, “‘No Bourgeoisie, No Democracy’? The Political Attitudes of the Kenyan Middle Class”, *Journal of International Development* (Vol. 27, 2015), p. 654; Cheeseman, Kanyinga and Lynch, ‘The Political Economy of Kenya’.
 39. As noted by Cheeseman, Kanyinga and Lynch, ‘parts of the country that have “held” the presidency – the Central Province heartlands of the Kikuyu and the Rift Valley stronghold of the Kalenjin – are in many ways more developed than those areas that have tended to be in opposition’. See Cheeseman, Kanyinga and Lynch, ‘The Political Economy of Kenya’, p. 12. Additional studies reflect how communities with co-ethnics in power at all levels tend to receive more public goods than those with non-co-ethnics in power. See Susanne Mueller, ‘High-Stakes Ethnic Politics’, in Cheeseman, Kanyinga and Lynch (eds), *Oxford Handbook of Kenyan Politics*.
 40. Cheeseman, Kanyinga and Lynch, ‘The Political Economy of Kenya’.
 41. As Patrick Mbugua writes, this violence displayed specific patterns and sequencing. Senior government ministers and KANU politicians convened rallies in strategic areas such as the Rift Valley, promoting ‘hate narratives centred on nativist thinking and autochthonous notions of identity’. Armed militia groups would then attack target communities, disguising the killings as ‘ethnic’ rather than political conflict with the use of ‘traditional dress’ and weaponry. See Patrick Mbugua, ‘Why BII will not Promote Peace or Prevent Violence’, *The Elephant*, 20 November 2020.
 42. This figure includes more than 400 people reportedly shot by police, many in opposition strongholds across the west including Kisumu, Siaya, Migori and Homabay. See Human Rights Watch, ‘Kenya: Post-Election Killings, Abuse’, 27 August 2017, <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/08/27/kenya-post-election-killings-abuse>>, accessed 22 February 2023.
 43. Murithi Mutiga, ‘Kenya: Avoiding Another Electoral Crisis’, International Crisis Group, 2017.
 44. Each with a directly elected governor, senator, women’s representative and assembly member. See Nic Cheeseman et al., ‘Kenya’s 2017 Elections: Winner-Takes-All Politics as Usual?’, *Journal of Eastern African Studies* (Vol. 12, No. 2, 2019), pp. 215–34.

incentivised legal arbitration, and an Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) replaced the largely defunct Electoral Commission of Kenya, exercising a mandate to organise and monitor voting.⁴⁵

Nevertheless, the spectre of inter-communal conflict continued to haunt the country's democratic experience. Suspicion and complaints marred the 2013 poll, with 'contestation over the voters' register, failure of technology, and accusations by the opposition that the IEBC had presided over electoral fraud'.⁴⁶ The success of the 'Jubilee Alliance' – Uhuru Kenyatta and his running mate William Ruto – also strained relations with the UK, the EU and the US, which collectively criticised the pair's candidacy in light of their 2011 indictment by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for alleged complicity in political violence during the 2007–08 crisis.⁴⁷ In response, the new government refused to renew any UK defence agreement, and 'play[ed] [its] cards well' by accelerating Kibaki's 'look east' strategy and diversifying Kenya's donor base.⁴⁸ While the UK maintained a significant economic role across the country – interviews noted that British companies employ roughly 250,000 people and contribute a significant share of corporate tax revenue – foreign investment and infrastructural development were reconfigured around China, India and Japan, with state-backed loans from Beijing financing projects by Chinese contractors.

With Western leverage diminishing, the UK and others were eventually obliged to mend fences: David Cameron welcomed Kenyatta to London in 2013 and 2015, leading to the restoration of defence cooperation.⁴⁹ The ICC charges were later dropped, while another legal case awarded Mau Mau veterans a £19.9 million settlement from the British High Court in a 'striking admission of colonial abuses'.⁵⁰

One area where mutual interests consistently converged was regional security and, more specifically, the War on Terror. After the 1998 US embassy bombing in Nairobi, Kenya received rising levels of programmatic and financial support from Washington,⁵¹ and was formally designated an 'anchor state' four years

45. Jones, "To Go Forward is Not to Arrive".

46. Collins Odote, 'The 2013 Elections and the Peace Narrative: 2013–2015', in Cheeseman, Kanyinga and Lynch (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Kenyan Politics*, p. 103.

47. As acknowledged by interviewees and outlined in Njoki Wamai, 'International Relations and the International Criminal Court', in Cheeseman, Kanyinga and Lynch (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Kenyan Politics*.

48. As referenced by interviewees and outlined in Wamai, 'International Relations and the International Criminal Court', pp. 562–76.

49. Aislinn Laing, 'Britain and Kenya End Diplomatic Stand-Off with Fresh Troop Training Deal', *The Telegraph*, 1 October 2015.

50. Cullen, "Kenya is No Doubt a Special Case", pp. 8–9.

51. Examples include the 'establishment of the National Security Intelligence Service with support from the U.S. Anti-Terrorism Assistance (ATA) Program; creation of the Anti-Terrorism Police Unit (ATPU) in 1998, a Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF) and the National Counter-Terrorism Center (NCTC) in 2003; and the

later to stem infiltration by foreign extremists⁵² and contain spillover from conflict in neighbouring Somalia. The UK, alongside Denmark, reinforced these inputs by supplying ‘communication hardware and operations training’ to local administration police and collaborating with Kenyan special forces.⁵³ With the emergence of Al-Shabaab, a radical offshoot of the Islamic Courts Union and belated franchise of Al-Qa’ida, external investment was scaled up as Kenya was gradually drawn into direct military interventions, at first covertly and later more visibly through the launch of Operation *Linda Nchi* (*Protect the Country*) in 2011.⁵⁴ Problems quickly surfaced, including: high casualty rates; poor resourcing; alleged war-profiteering and abuses by Kenyan Defence Force (KDF) troops;⁵⁵ and political tensions with Ethiopia and the Federal Government of Somalia.⁵⁶ Additionally, Al-Shabaab-related violence via cross-border raids, homegrown cells and local affiliates such as Al-Hijra⁵⁷ began escalating in northeastern counties, supplemented by a series of high-profile terror attacks.⁵⁸ At the same time, recruiters were able to exploit heavy-handed security reprisals, domestic grievances and weak institutional coverage across Kenya’s social and geographic peripheries – a strategy often reinforced by ingrained patterns of corruption, marginalisation and police abuse.⁵⁹ In response, the US, the UK and the EU supplied further funds, military support and training for the KDF, alongside a raft of counterterrorism, peacebuilding and preventing/countering violent extremism (P/CVE) activities.

National Security Advisory Committee (NSAC) in 2004’. See Jacob Shapiro, Clint Watts and Vahid Brown, ‘Al-Qa’ida’s (Mis)Adventures in the Horn of Africa’, Combating Terrorism Center at Westpoint, 2 July 2007, p. 57.

52. The US National Security Strategy of 2002 cast Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa as ‘anchor states’ for US security policies in sub-Saharan Africa. Jan Bachmann and Jana Honke, ‘Peace and Security as Counterterrorism? The Political Effects of Liberal Interventions in Kenya’, *African Affairs* (Vol. 109, No. 434, 2010).
53. *Ibid.*
54. The operation’s overarching objectives included the prevention of further Al-Shabaab raids into northern Kenya, the safeguarding of a prospective ‘Lamu Port–South Sudan–Ethiopia Transport’ (LAPSSSET) corridor project, and the fostering of conditions conducive to a gradual return of Somali refugees. See David Anderson, ‘Kenya’s War in Somalia’ in Cheeseman, Kanyinga and Lynch (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Kenyan Politics*, p. 577; International Crisis Group, ‘Al-Shabaab Five Years After Westgate: Still a Menace in East Africa’, Africa Report No. 165, 21 September 2018.
55. Anderson, ‘Kenya’s War in Somalia’ in Cheeseman, Kanyinga and Lynch (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Kenyan Politics*.
56. International Crisis Group, ‘Ending the Dangerous Standoff in Southern Somalia’, Africa Briefing No. 158, 14 July 2020.
57. Eventually integrated into Jaysh Ayman. See Michael Jones, ‘A Template for the Global South? Understanding the Promises and Pitfalls of Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism in Kenya’, RUSI Emerging Insights, 17 December 2020.
58. For instance, attacks in Nairobi’s Westgate Mall (2013), Mpeketoni (2014), Garissa University (2015) and the Dusit-D2 complex (2019).
59. For example, see Jeremy Lind, Patrick Mutahi and Marjoke Oostom, “‘Killing a Mosquito with a Hammer’”: Al-Shabaab Violence and State Security Responses in Kenya’, *Peacebuilding* (Vol. 5, No. 2, 2017), pp. 118–35.

Kenya's 2017 election was again controversial, with the Supreme Court annulling the first vote for 'irregularities and illegalities', and Kenyatta winning the second ballot amid a boycott by the opposition.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, successive Conservative governments in London continued to cultivate ties, with a focus on trade. Theresa May's 2018 visit was the first by a British premier in 30 years, and the bilateral relationship was elevated to a formal Strategic Partnership in 2020, comprising five pillars focused on 'mutual prosperity, security and stability, sustainable development, climate change, and people to people ... the key challenges and opportunities of our time'.⁶¹

For the UK, the agreement reflected a post-Brexit focus on reinvigorating partnerships with fast-growing economies outside the EU; for Kenya, it offered the possibility of greater commercial and security ties with London. Though Nairobi continues to borrow from China and others,⁶² it is now too wealthy to claim financial relief from Beijing, leading to a possible souring of public opinion⁶³ as debt-service obligations consume 60% of state revenue.⁶⁴ Buoyed by the comparatively peaceful transfer of power to President William Ruto in 2022, and cautious optimism over Kenya's maturing democratic institutions, interviewees therefore saw opportunities for further consolidating the UK–Kenyan relationship.⁶⁵

60. Cheeseman et al., 'Kenya's 2017 Elections'.

61. HM Government, 'UK–Kenya Strategic Partnership 2020 to 2025: Joint Statement', 21 January 2020.

62. Kenya's public debt increased almost fivefold between 2013 and 2022. See Abdi Latif Dahir, "'Jewel in the Crown of Corruption": The Troubles of Kenya's China-Funded Train', *New York Times*, 7 August 2022, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/07/world/africa/kenya-election-train.html>>, accessed 18 July 2023.

63. Coalition for Global Prosperity, 'Outcompeting Strategic Challengers: The Case of China in Africa', March 2023, p. 25; Fergus Kell, 'Kenya's Debt Struggles Go Far Deeper Than Chinese Loans', Chatham House, 31 May 2023. A poll conducted by Afrobarometer in 2019–20 found approximately 87% of Kenyans thought their government borrowed excessively from China. See Edem Selormey, 'Africans; Perceptions About China: A Sneak Peek from 18 Countries', Afrobarometer, 3 September 2020, <https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/migrated/files/africa-china_relations-3sept20.pdf>, accessed 18 July 2023.

64. David Herbling, 'How Kenya's Debt Service Obligations Climbed to \$12 Billion', *Bloomberg*, 8 April 2022. Crucially, this is not just a symptom of Chinese loans, which account for 'roughly 64 per cent of Kenya's current stock of bilateral external debt and only 17 per cent of total external public debt'. See Kell, 'Kenya's Debt Struggles Go Far Deeper Than Chinese Loans'. As Kell argues, 'multilateral borrowing is almost double the bilateral total, with the World Bank being Kenya's largest single external creditor'. Additionally, State House accumulated a range of syndicate loans, with debt servicing on commercial borrowing reaching similar levels to that of the Standard Gauge Railway loans owed to China (around \$850 million and \$800 million respectively between July 2022 and March 2023). See Kell, 'Kenya's Debt Struggles Go Far Deeper Than Chinese Loans'.

65. As evidenced by Boris Johnson and Uhuru Kenyatta's joint hosting of the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) summit in 2021. See GPE, 'Global Education Summit in London Raises US\$4 Billion for the Global Partnership for Education to Help 175 Million Children Learn', 29 July 2021.

UK Policy Priorities and Engagement

The UK's historical embeddedness in Kenya has clearly shaped the ongoing political, economic and development dimensions of its engagement. Commercial ties, regional security and military cooperation have stayed more or less consistent for 60 years, even if competing agendas have sometimes necessitated trade-offs. As well as being an important hub for UK defence,⁶⁶ and a bedrock for furthering stability and counterterrorism, Kenya is referenced in the Integrated Review⁶⁷ and the 2022 International Development Strategy⁶⁸ as a partner on education, women and girls' equality, climate change, shared prosperity goals and democratic values, and adjacent priorities in poverty reduction and mitigating transnational crime.

Development and Humanitarian Engagement

Eclipsed by the US in the 1960s,⁶⁹ the UK's bilateral Official Development Assistance (ODA) contributions to Kenya averaged around £130.7 million between 2015 and 2020, peaking at £152.8 million in 2017,⁷⁰ before falling below Japan in 2018, France and EU institutions in 2020, and Germany a year later.⁷¹ Partly tied to a wider decrease in British aid spending from 0.7% to 0.5% of GNI, the government's in-country budget dropped from £134 million (2019)⁷² to £72 million (2021)⁷³ – roughly 46% over two years – slightly exceeding the 42% cut across Africa as a whole.⁷⁴

66. HM Government, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age*, p. 73.

67. *Ibid.*, pp. 5, 16, 20, 63.

68. FCDO, 'The UK Government's Strategy for International Development', Policy Paper, 16 May 2022, p. 25.

69. Michael Chege, 'Political Economy of Foreign Aid to Kenya', in Cheeseman, Kanyinga and Lynch (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Kenyan Politics*, p. 556.

70. FCDO, *Annual Report and Accounts 2020-2021*.

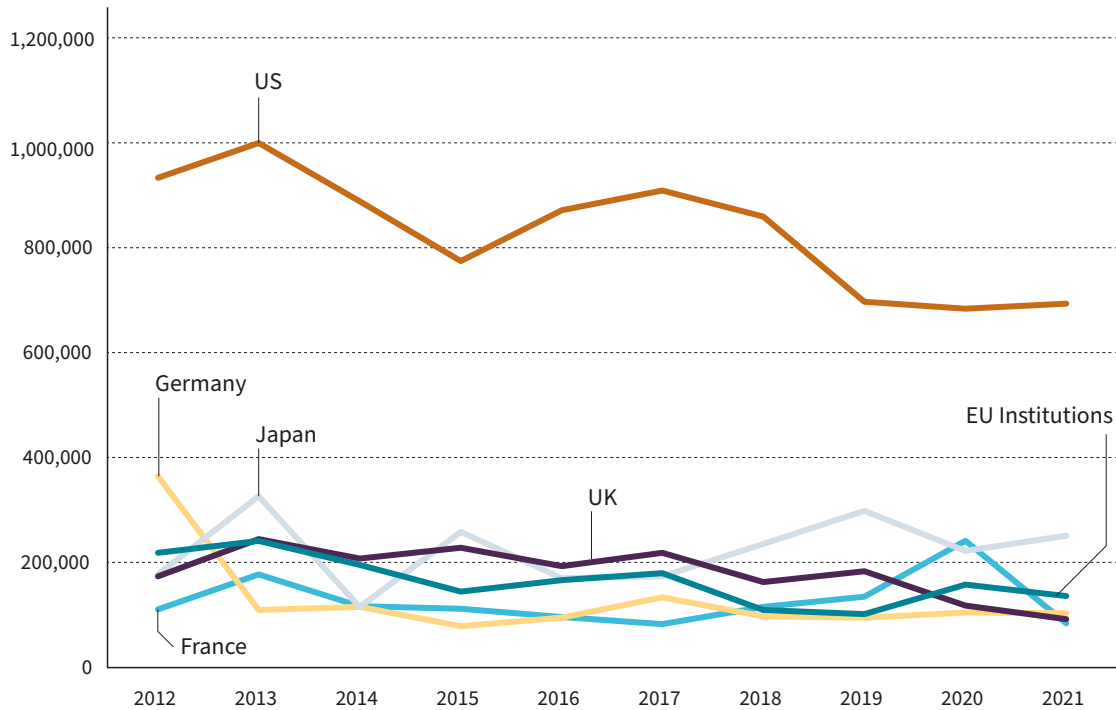
71. OECD, 'Aid at a Glance Charts', <<https://www.oecd.org/dac/financing-sustainable-development/development-finance-data/aid-at-a-glance.htm#recipients>>, accessed 6 February 2023. UK budgets were also dwarfed by Chinese spending, but it should be noted that Beijing does not consider development credit as ODA, preferring to package different funding streams as commercial transactions rather than 'aid [as] conventionally defined'. See Michael Chege, 'The Political Economy of Foreign Aid to Kenya', in Cheeseman, Kanyinga and Lynch (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Kenyan Politics*.

72. FCDO, 'National Statistics on International Development: Final UK Aid Spend 2020', September 2021, Table 6a, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/statistics-on-international-development-final-uk-aid-spend-2020>>, accessed 7 February 2023.

73. FCDO, 'Statistics on International Development: Final UK Aid Spend 2021', November 2022, p. 74, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1119765/Statistics-on-International-Development-Final-UK-Aid-Spend-2021.pdf>, accessed 7 February 2023.

74. FCDO, 'National Statistics on International Development: Final UK Aid Spend 2021', 23 November 2022, Table 5, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/statistics-on-international-development-final-uk-aid-spend-2021>>, accessed 7 February 2023.

Figure 1: Top DAC Country (and EU) Bilateral ODA Spenders in Kenya (\$ Millions)



Source: OECD, 'Creditor Reporting System', <<https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=crs1>>, accessed 17 July 2023.⁷⁵

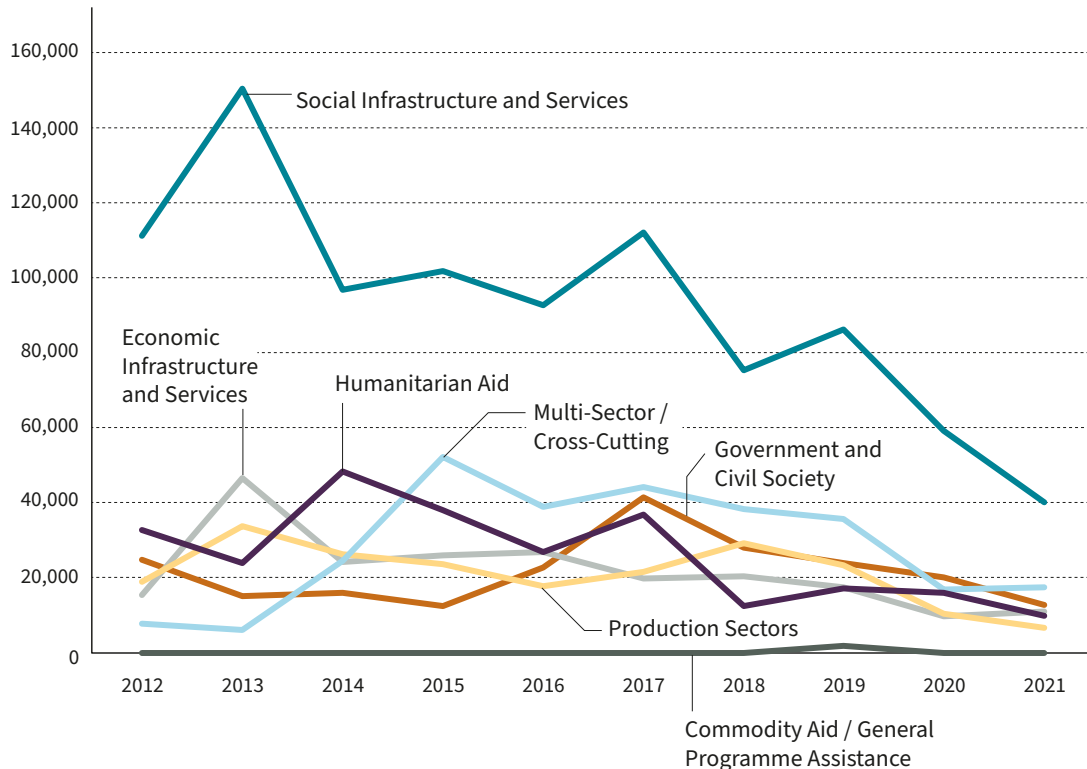
In terms of coverage and content, social infrastructure regularly consumed the largest proportion of UK ODA, although specific distributions have fluctuated over time. Resources for social protection and education declined from 2013 and 2014 respectively, while funding for national and county health systems – especially insurance provision, structural reforms and nutrition – rose steadily from 2017.⁷⁶ This was particularly acute during the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic, which saw the UK Department of Health and Social Care supply over 410,000 vaccines bilaterally, and a further 407,000 as part of the UK's contribution to the COVAX initiative.⁷⁷

75. The OECD's Creditor Reporting System (CRS) provides a 'set of readily available basic data that enables analysis on where aid goes, what purpose it serves and what policies it aims to implement' across individual projects and programmes. The CRS figures used in this paper reflect gross disbursements (rather than commitments) across all channels using constant (rather than current) prices to control for fluctuations in exchange rates and inflation levels.

76. Rynn and Jones with Glantz, 'Furthering Global Britain?'

77. See UNICEF, 'Another 410,000 COVID-19 Vaccine Doses Arrive in Kenya, Donated by the UK', press release, 31 July 2021.

Figure 2: Sample Sectors of UK ODA Bilateral Spending in Kenya (\$ Millions)



Source: OECD, ‘Credit Reporting System’.

Since the 2007–08 crisis, UK governance (elections and financial management), peacebuilding and security programming has been backed by significant spending and political capital,⁷⁸ with the former increasing as a proportion of ODA after 2015⁷⁹ as part of a wider push to ‘improve [public] systems and accountability, tackle corruption and reduce conflict and the risk of radicalisation’.⁸⁰ Interviewees cited various priorities, from reforming the criminal justice system to bolstering community-led mechanisms for conflict management and preventing violence against women and girls. Investments were made in local judicial capacity for trying terrorism cases, improving community policing, and training a ‘critical mass’ of officers in gender sensitivities, human rights, and social outreach. Several research participants likewise noted a shift towards north-eastern Kenya to support national-, county- and local-level CVE interventions tackling the root

78. See, for example, HM Government, ‘East Africa Crime and Justice Programme Summary 2020–2021’, CSSF Programme Survey, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/conflict-stability-and-security-fund-programme-summaries-for-africa-2020-to-2021>>, accessed 20 February 2023.

79. Rynn and Jones with Glantz, ‘Furthering Global Britain?’.

80. DFID, ‘DFID Kenya’, Country Profile, 2018, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/913359/Kenya-Profile.pdf>, accessed 23 February 2023.

causes of violent extremism and strengthening resilience among ‘at risk’ populations.

Additionally, the UK – among other donors – has committed substantial resources towards assisting devolutionary processes, fostering citizen engagement and abetting county authorities in the delivery of reliable services. Spending on ‘government and civil society’ surged in 2017,⁸¹ for instance, and is important within today’s reduced ODA footprint, though it remains lower than past levels arguably due to aggregate cuts in aid and an apparent fragmentation of Kenya’s civic space (as outlined in Chapter III).⁸²

Respondents also referenced the significant attention directed towards aid provision, including cash transfers for drought victims, flood relief and refugee support and empowerment,⁸³ alongside environmental protection. During the UK COP presidency, the UK backed a Kenyan roadmap on climate change with a strong emphasis on growing clean energy generation and (battery) storage capacity, and helped promote reforestation and resilience in arid areas and other ecological projects, as well as developing regulatory systems for green finance.

At the same time, the UK continues to support productivity and commercial development, with stakeholders emphasising domestic empowerment, entrepreneurship and technological advances. Trade has risen in prominence, with the UK offering substantial loans, technical assistance and financial partnerships via TradeMark East Africa – a multi-donor ‘aid-for-trade’ initiative. Having strengthened customs infrastructure at key border points and maritime hubs⁸⁴ since 2010, in part to boost economic security and regional integration,⁸⁵ the UK is reportedly now looking to translate these outcomes into local job creation and greater industrial growth.

81. Rynn and Jones with Glantz, ‘Furthering Global Britain?’

82. This spending includes programmes such as the Deepening Democracy Programme (2015–20) and the more recent Kenya Elections Support Project. HM Government, ‘Deepening Democracy Programme (DDP) Kenya’, Programme Completion Review, December 2020, <<https://devtracker.fcdo.gov.uk/projects/GB-1-204437/summary>>, accessed 4 August 2022; HM Government, ‘Kenya Elections Support Programme (KESP): Annual Review Template – September 2020’, <<https://devtracker.fcdo.gov.uk/projects/GB-GOV-1-300657/summary>>, accessed 4 August 2022. For analysis, see Jones, “‘To Go Forward is Not to Arrive’”.

83. FCDO, ‘Hunger Safety Net Programme (HSNP Phase 3)’, IATI Identifier: GB-GOV-1-300143, last updated 14 September 2022, <<https://devtracker.fcdo.gov.uk/projects/GB-GOV-1-300143/summary#:~:text=IATI%20Identifier%3A%20GB-GOV-1-300143%20Description%20To%20reduce%20poverty%2C%20hunger,250%2C000%20households%20%28approximately%201%2C250%2C000%20people%29%20during%20drought%20emergencies.>>>, accessed 4 October 2022; FCDO, ‘New UK Support to Tackle Impact of Droughts and Flooding in East Africa’, press release, 17 January 2022; HM Government, ‘Refugees Under the Kenya Integrated Refugee and Host Community Programme (PAMOJA) 2018–23’, <<https://devtracker.fcdo.gov.uk/projects/GB-GOV-1-300139/summary>>, accessed 14 February 2023.

84. Including Mombasa and Lamu ports.

85. TradeMark East Africa, ‘Who We Are’, <www.trademarka.com/who-we-are/#who-we-are>, accessed 5 July 2022.

Diplomatic Engagement

Since the tensions surrounding the ICC indictments and 2013 election, the UK has managed to revitalise military cooperation, development, trade and political relations in Nairobi.⁸⁶ Theresa May's 2018 visit was nested among at least a dozen ministerial trips by foreign, defence and development secretaries, as well as ministers for the armed forces and Africa since 2015.⁸⁷ Collectively, these engagements have helped facilitate joint Kenyan–UK leadership in global education and the climate agenda; improve collaboration across various international forums; expand bilateral security ties; and strengthen UK commercial interests, as signalled by the formalisation of a Strategic Partnership in 2020.

Although the UK red listed Kenya during the Covid-19 pandemic, prompting retaliation, Kenyatta went to London in July 2021 to co-chair the Global Education Summit⁸⁸ in alliance with the UK's commitment to empowering women and girls, raising a record \$4 billion for the Global Partnership for Education.⁸⁹ Johnson also 'made a point of meeting Kenyatta', and despite Whitehall scepticism over the benefit of top-level exchanges, interviewees felt these discussions smoothed a path to renewing the UK's defence and trade relationships. Similarly, when UK prime minister Rishi Sunak conferred with Ruto at COP27 in Egypt in 2022, the two agreed to 'expand their cooperation' on peace, security, energy, agriculture and infrastructure, while the UK would 'expedite new green investments in Kenya'.⁹⁰

To boost sustainable growth, the UK has supported improvements in environmental, social and corporate standards. Under the 2020 Economic Partnership Agreement, London pledged funds to expand bilateral trade and granted Kenya 'duty and quota free' access to British markets,⁹¹ although there were concerns such a deal could leave local industries outcompeted by cheaper imports,⁹² or disrupt regional integration within the East African Community (EAC).⁹³ In 2021, Kenya was listed as a priority country in British International

86. DFID, 'DFID Kenya'.

87. Rynn and Jones with Glantz, 'Furthering Global Britain?'

88. Prime Minister's Office, 'UK and Kenya to Host Major Education Summit in 2021', press release, 12 October 2020.

89. FCDO, *Annual Report and Accounts 2021–22*, p. 10.

90. Kenya High Commission, UK, 'Kenya and UK Strategic Partnership', 11 November 2022, <<https://www.kenyahighcom.org.uk/news/uk-kenya-to-partner-in-green-energy-projects>>, accessed 14 February 2023.

91. FCDO, 'UK Mobilises KES 20 Billion Investment into Kenya's Big Four Projects', press release, 27 July 2021.

92. Due in part to Kenyan companies being hampered by 'high energy costs' and structural bottlenecks'. See Anyanzwa, 'Kenya–UK Trade Deal Specifies Products with Duty and Quota-Free Access', *East African*, 1 March 2021.

93. House of Lords International Agreements Committee, 'Scrutiny of International Agreements: Economic Partnership Agreement with Kenya, Trade in Goods Agreement with Norway and Iceland, and Free Trade

Investment's (BII) \$1-billion pan-African suite of infrastructure, finance and climate projects,⁹⁴ supplementing assistance to 30 regional funds and more than 80 local finance, tech and green enterprises.⁹⁵ Later that year, then foreign secretary Dominic Raab declared a further £132 million in public and private funding aligned with Kenyatta's 'Big Four Agenda' – food security, affordable housing, universal healthcare and manufacturing/job creation.⁹⁶ Environmental and commercial diplomacy also converged with UK interests in supporting Kenya's nascent 'blue economy'.⁹⁷

Defence and Security Engagement

Nairobi is considered an 'essential' defence partner of the UK by dint of history and geography: Kenya not only hosts significant British military assets and infrastructure but also shares a border with Somalia, South Sudan and Ethiopia, and functions as a logistical corridor for central Africa. As a result, it was eventually designated a regional hub in the Ministry of Defence's (MoD's) 'persistent engagement strategy', with the 2021 Defence Command Paper prescribing a further expansion of UK commitments and the continuation of joint training and readiness.⁹⁸

Much of the bilateral relationship is framed by the Security Compact, an arrangement approved in 2015 (and updated in 2018, 2021 and 2023)⁹⁹ that covers CVE, border and aviation policing, and criminal justice cooperation, alongside wider programmes to tackle instability and conflict. Whitehall also signed Defence Cooperation Agreements with Nairobi in 2016 and 2021, renewing the legal instruments maintaining the British Army Training Unit Kenya (BATUK,

Agreement with Vietnam', HL Paper 221, Second Report of Session 2019–21, February 2021, p. 5. EAC membership includes Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda.

94. Miriam Wangui, 'UK's CDC Group to Invest KSh110 Billion in African Businesses', *Kenyan Wall Street*, 21 January 2021. BII was formerly the Commonwealth Development Corporation (CDC).

95. British International Investment, 'British International Investment Re-Establishes its Presence in Kenya', 13 May 2022.

96. FCDO, 'UK Announces £132m of New Investments in Kenya', press release, 27 July 2021.

97. Defined as the 'sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth, livelihoods and jobs, and ocean ecosystem health'. NTU International, 'Blue Economy in Kenya', <www.ntu.eu/maritime/blue-economy-in-kenya/>, accessed 6 February 2023; Patience Kiyuka, 'Promoting Blue Economy Opportunities Over the Airwaves in Kilifi, Kenya', Commonwealth Scholarships, 2023.

98. MoD, *Defence in a Competitive Age*, CP 411 (London: The Stationery Office, 2021), p. 31.

99. The latest agreement 'includes £10 million a year of funding to support counter-terrorism programmes, as well as commitments on defence, international cooperation, community security, law enforcement and criminal justice, cyber security, and bilateral, multilateral and regional coordination.' It also references Deris Wanaag, a new three-year programme to support local communities along the Somali-Kenya and Somali-Ethiopian border. See Home Office, 'Security Minister Travels to Kenya to Agree New Partnership', 12 May 2023, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/security-minister-travels-to-kenya-to-agree-new-partnership>>, accessed 25 July 2023.

host of the multinational ‘Askari Storm’ exercises), and sundry exchanges, assurance visits and technical capacity-building schemes conducted with the KDF. Striving to become a ‘partner of choice in the marine domain’, the UK likewise delivers courses on maritime security and firefighting to the Kenyan Navy.¹⁰⁰ Additionally, the British Peace Support Team (BPST-A) – a small hybrid unit based in Karen – advises and assists African militaries contributing to the AU Transitional Mission in Somalia (formerly AMISOM) and UN peacekeeping operations,¹⁰¹ and works with the International Peace Support Training Centre (IPSTC) to strengthen institutional learning and regional responses to complex emergencies.

MoD officials are currently reviewing how to improve coherence and efficiency across the different strands of UK defence engagement (e.g., BATUK, the UK Support Node at Kifaru Barracks and BPST-A) and – given the sensitivities and controversies surrounding a permanent British military presence¹⁰² – assessing how best to deliver ‘persistent engagement’¹⁰³ while retaining local buy-in.

100. Royal Navy, ‘Royal Navy Shares Life-Saving Expertise with Kenyan Navy’, 4 August 2022, <<https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/news-and-latest-activity/news/2022/august/04/220804-kenya-training-team>>, accessed 23 August 2022.

101. The UK has also had a hand in shaping AMISOM/ATMIS (as it is UNSC penholder for Somalia) and other peace operations via the UN and other diplomacy.

102. See Nicholas Komu and Mercy Mwendu, ‘Kenya: British Army Training Unit Kenya Lurching from Crisis to Crisis’, *Daily Nation*, December 2021.

103. HM Government, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age*, p. 69.

II. Focus Areas

Based mainly on interview data, this chapter unpacks three examples of relatively ‘successful’ UK contributions in Kenya: electoral support (and crisis management); defence cooperation and capacity building; and education programming (as part of wider UK investment in social infrastructure and sustainable development).¹⁰⁴ Each is an important dimension of UK engagement in Kenya, illustrating factors that enable or constrain the ‘Global Britain agenda’, such as leadership and flexibility, cultivating partnerships, leveraging ‘politically smart’ interventions, and adopting a more joined up, strategic approach to regional engagement.

Elections

As noted above, elections have remained volatile since the transition to multiparty democracy in 1992, marred by high-stakes, zero-sum competition; ethno-centric mobilisation; corruption; and a top-heavy constitution. While wide-ranging changes were made in 2010,¹⁰⁵ ‘adding levels of complexity’ that many donors were arguably ‘slow to appreciate’, the UK has played a prominent role in coalescing international support and working with Kenyan actors to preserve stability. Interviewees described a blend of crisis management and backing for long-term structural reforms to mitigate violence and support credible, inclusive ballots. Drawing on lessons from a comparatively peaceful – if precarious – process in 2017, the British High Commission (BHC) and the FCDO launched a new suite of programmes in 2020 to bolster the performance of local regulatory bodies and state institutions.

The £7.5 million Kenya Elections Support Project (KESP) (2020–23), for instance, sought to strengthen the feasibility of IEBC’s Elections Operations Plan, expand strategic communications, and consolidate linkages between the Commission, the Judiciary Committee on Elections (JCE), the Office of the Registrar of Political

104. To preserve interviewee anonymity, many of the quotations in this chapter and Chapter III are unattributed.

105. Not least a ‘50%+1 threshold for the presidential election; the devolution of power to 47 county governments; and the introduction of a Supreme Court with the right to hear presidential electoral petitions’. See Cheeseman et al, ‘Kenya’s 2017 Elections: Winner-Takes-All Politics as Usual?’.

Parties and the Political Parties Dispute Tribunal.¹⁰⁶ Despite tight timeframes,¹⁰⁷ progress was evident, owing in part to the cumulative (and somewhat incidental) impact of UK interventions stretching back to 2013.

Drawing on pre-existing access, trust and familiarity, KESP technical assistance was able to help address administrative gaps across IEBC's directorates, improving stakeholder engagement and operations management.¹⁰⁸ Implementation plans, training, and a monitoring and evaluation regime were developed, with a particular focus on boosting internal decision-making, leadership and crisis response. Support was likewise supplied to 'operationalise' IEBC's automated case management system,¹⁰⁹ and an embedded strategic communications adviser assisted in streamlining the Commission's messaging, with respondents citing a correlated rise in public trust. Additionally, the project updated election dispute resolution (EDR) policies and developed a new strategic plan for the JCE.¹¹⁰ This fed into a revised curriculum for training judges, magistrates and court staff, with UK-backed roundtables facilitating an exchange of lessons and good practice among peers from other African countries.

One area of apparent success lay in fostering interagency consultation and collaboration. After IEBC boycotted an initial Joint Institutional Working Group over fears of state inference, KESP managed to convene a lower-level process to harmonise EDR procedures and – according to interviewees – facilitate a 'unified strategy of engagement' for 'unblocking' sensitive issues. The UK also leveraged a breadth of partnerships via other programmes to broker 'working relations' between Kenyan stakeholders, including IEBC and the National Police Service. While these arrangements were often tenuous – allegations of executive overreach strained ties with the Ministry of Interior,¹¹¹ and spats between the Commission and the Director of Criminal Investigations surfaced in July 2022 – they secured agreement over security planning and shared training materials. Perhaps as a corollary, 'proven public order management practices' were increasingly adopted,¹¹²

106. HM Government, Kenya Election Support Programme (KESP), Annual Review, Development Tracker, January 2022, <<https://devtracker.fcdo.gov.uk/projects/GB-GOV-1-300657/documents>>, accessed 7 February 2023.

107. A relatively lengthy tendering process and disruption by the Covid-19 pandemic delayed the project's launch and preliminary stages of its implementation.

108. KESP, Annual Review, Development Tracker, January 2022.

109. Help was also provided for 'onboard[ing] the EDR case processes onto the existing e-court system'. See HM Government, 'Kenya Elections Support Programme (KESP)', Annual Review, Development Tracker, January 2022, p. 15, <https://iati.fcdo.gov.uk/iati_documents/D0001315.odt>, accessed 14 February 2023.

110. *Ibid.*

111. For example, IEBC withdrew from the National Multi-Sector Consultative Forum on Electoral Preparedness in November 2021, complaining that the interior ministry's leadership infringed on the Commission's independence. See Onyango K'Onyango, 'IEBC Pulls Out of Election Preparedness Forum', *The Nation*, 30 November 2021, <<https://nation.africa/kenya/news/iebc-pulls-out-of-election-preparedness-forum-3636036>>, accessed 14 February 2023.

112. Christopher Hockey, 'Elections in Kenya: Cautious Optimism?', *RUSI Commentary*, 5 August 2022.

law enforcement coverage was extended to every polling station, and in the 2022 general election, no incidents of ‘excessive force’ by police were reported during the vote itself.¹¹³

These technical inputs appeared to boost the capabilities of regulatory entities like IEBC, contributing to a relatively smooth electoral process – in no way a foregone conclusion, given the limits in funding and obtrusion from strands of the Kenyan government. As in 2017, the Commission received just a fraction of the cash requested to run the ballot, with incremental top-ups in February and March 2022 still leaving a significant deficit.¹¹⁴ Measures prescribed by past audits and the Independent Review Commission¹¹⁵ were similarly delayed or ignored. Although ‘electoral laws and personnel should [have been] in place at least two years before polling day’, four of the seven IEBC commissioners were approved and appointed in September 2021.¹¹⁶ A chief executive officer was confirmed in March 2022, four years after his predecessor quit.¹¹⁷ By June, officials remained well behind in establishing structures to manage the vote, including the procurement of ‘crucial materials’.¹¹⁸ Legislation clarifying key procedures was also impeded or rejected by Parliament, leaving authorities ‘guessing about regulations [they had] to enact’ until weeks before the ballot.¹¹⁹

Against this backdrop, KESP was one of the few programmes supporting Kenya’s electoral bodies at scale, becoming ‘instrumental’ in mitigating widespread constraints. Despite concerns that ‘the 2022 elections [would] not achieve higher standards than 2017’,¹²⁰ IEBC was instead praised by many for its performance and transparency, revealing improvements in efficiency and process that stem in part from UK capacity building.

Delivering KESP in the face of countervailing political currents speaks to the BHC’s flexibility, contextual awareness and influence. The UK engaged earlier in the electoral cycle than other funders,¹²¹ buying time for participatory planning

113. EU Election Observation Mission, ‘Final Report: EU Election Observation Mission Kenya 2022’, 27 October 2022.

114. International Crisis Group, ‘Kenya’s 2022 Election: High Stakes’, Briefing No. 182, 2022.

115. An international commission of enquiry appointed after the 2008 electoral violence.

116. International Crisis Group, ‘Kenya’s 2022 Election’.

117. *Ibid.*

118. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

119. *Ibid.* For instance, campaign finance reform, the Elections (Amendment) Bill and a subsequent set of five draft election regulations were not enacted by Parliament, in spite of urging from IEBC. See EU Election Observation Mission, ‘General Elections – 9 August 2022, Preliminary Statement’, 11 August 2022, p. 4, <www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/EU%20EOM%20Kenya%202022%20Preliminary%20Statement%2011%20August%202022.pdf>, accessed 14 February 2023.

120. HM Government, ‘Deepening Democracy Programme (DDP) Kenya’, Programme Completion Review, December 2020, p. 7.

121. For example, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) ‘basket fund’ (largely backed by the EU and Germany) and USAID electoral programming were severely disrupted by restrictions imposed on donors by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

and relationship-building. This increased government buy-in and afforded the 'leeway' to navigate belated restrictions imposed on donors by Kenya's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.¹²² Engagement was also framed in palatable terms. FCDO personnel invested time and diplomatic capital networking with senior officials, private sector interests and civil society, with the High Commissioner repeatedly emphasising Kenya's sovereignty and the technical disposition of British programming.¹²³ Notably, KESP focused on communication, training and bureaucratic cohesion – issues peripheral to Nairobi's political elite – while largely avoiding sensitive areas such as procurement and budgetary support.

At the same time, the BHC assumed an influential role in coordinating external engagement, partially facilitated by KESP's unusual levels of access to regulatory institutions; the longevity and depth of bilateral UK ties to Kenya; the Mission's experience in electoral reform and comparatively high-risk appetite; the coincidental absence of a US ambassador;¹²⁴ and the High Commissioner's personal clout. Second only to the US in terms of resourcing, the UK was also able to marshal an 'impressively broad brains trust' to forecast and monitor developments and plan accordingly, with respondents emphasising how well-funded research, violence monitoring and analysis helped build consensus, guide discussion in international working groups, and align collective messaging. Much of this leadership was 'behind the scenes', with the UK helping shape the donor agenda but sharing or ceding ownership to mitigate political sensitivities.¹²⁵

The impact of such efforts should nevertheless not be overstated. Several security incidents were still reported, including an attack on a tallying centre in Wajir. Senior IEBC officials were detained by police, and another was found murdered in Nairobi.¹²⁶ Confusion 'marred the final presidential result declaration', with brawls pre-empting the announcement and four commissioners – all recent Kenyatta appointments – disputing the outcome and walking out in protest.¹²⁷

Interviewees also stressed the inevitable limitations of foreign agency when trying to reform complex political systems, and the informal conventions, elite bargaining and patrimonial logic underpinning them. First, Kenya's governmental budget is not dependent on external funding. Economic growth and the

122. In contrast, the delayed launch of USAID and UNDP basket fund projects (backed primarily by the EU and Germany) left them facing copious amounts of government obstruction and red tape.

123. See FCDO, 'Kenya National Elections Conference: Jane Marriott's Speech', 12 July 2022, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/kenya-national-elections-conference-jane-marriotts-speech>>, accessed 29 July 2022.

124. Ambassador Meg Whitman was nominated in December 2021 and presented her credentials to President Kenyatta the following August, despite her predecessor leaving office 19 months earlier.

125. This appeared to have mixed results. Despite low-key, strenuously non-partisan engagement, interviewees described how the UK was accused of favouring Ruto by those sympathetic to Oginda's Azimio la Umoja party, reflecting the BHC's continued vulnerability to politicisation and local demagoguery.

126. International Crisis Group, 'A Triumph for Kenya's Democracy', Statement, 8 September 2022.

127. *Ibid.*

diversification of Nairobi's donor base further diluted the leverage of Western powers to push conditionalities on aid, particularly when set against a growing demand for commercial partnerships.

Second, capacity building generally works at the margins. External interventions 'can improve the efficiency and mechanics of recipient organisations in ways deemed effective when set against their own metrics, but they rarely have a transformative effect on the (de)legitimacy of elections'.¹²⁸ Claims of electoral fraud by defeated candidates often shape popular perceptions regardless of improvements in official structures and processes. Similarly, technical measures – especially those led by international stakeholders – arguably do little to resolve the profligacy, cronyism and identity-based polarisation still afflicting Kenyan politics. In several cases, deal-making between 'ethno-regional brokers' was implicitly relied on to allay violence, incentivising graft and opacity, and enabling a 'super-elite' to fix policy around their own interests, with little accountability.¹²⁹ In short, donor action has a limited impact on Kenya's ingrained political culture or the 'moral economy' it conditions.¹³⁰ While the UK nested electoral reforms within wider activities – partnering with religious leaders and local activists to promote civic education, voter mobilisation and peacebuilding – these can help ameliorate, but do not shape, the societal context framing political violence.

In the case of the 2022 general election, a specific constellation of endogenous variables fed into a peaceful outcome. For instance, political apathy, low turnout and the cross-ethnic complexion of the two main coalitions tempered the centrifugal propensities of past ballots. Both main candidates for president, William Ruto (a Kalenjin) and Raila Odinga (a Luo), appointed Kikuyu running mates, dividing the Mount Kenya vote 'for the first time in 20 years'¹³¹ and reducing tensions between those constituencies previously involved in post-election violence. As a result, campaigning was unusually issue-led – albeit tinged with populist overtones – and candidates openly denounced unruly behaviour among their supporters.¹³² Reports noted a 75% decrease in politically motivated public disorder between January and June 2022, compared to five years earlier.¹³³ The 'power of incumbency' was similarly diluted, with Deputy President Ruto casting himself as a 'self-made everyman' in contrast to outgoing President Kenyatta's

128. Jones, "To Go Forward is Not to Arrive".

129. Cheeseman, Kanyinga and Lynch, 'The Political Economy of Kenya'.

130. Referenced by multiple interviewees and unpacked in Nic Cheeseman, Gabrielle Lynch and Justin Willis, *The Moral Economy of Elections in Africa: Democracy, Voting and Virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

131. Hockey, 'Elections in Kenya'. In this context, Mount Kenya is a colloquial term for Kikuyu bloc voting (the country's single largest political constituency).

132. Nic Cheeseman, 'Three Reasons Ethnicity Will Count for Less in Kenya's Upcoming Vote', *African Argument*, 26 July 2022.

133. Hockey, 'Elections in Kenya'.

preference, Odinga.¹³⁴ Without the structural asymmetries typically benefiting those already in office,¹³⁵ including the (mis)use of Kenya's state machinery and public resources, donors and electoral agencies arguably enjoyed greater space to operate (albeit still encumbered by MFA restrictions). This may have made a significant difference during pivotal moments of the process, with split affiliations in the security services potentially preventing political interference.¹³⁶

However, interviewees cautioned that the 2022 experience does not necessarily mean long-running ethnic cleavages have dissipated or that the inequalities characterising Kenyan democracy are now resolved. Odinga branded the new government 'illegitimate' and called for 'twice-weekly protests' only months after accepting the Supreme Court's decision to uphold the vote in September.¹³⁷ The demonstrations often escalated into violence, with three people killed and 400 wounded across the country.¹³⁸ Several commentators also condemned the composition of Ruto's selection panel for hiring new IEBC commissioners, questioning the body's political independence.¹³⁹ Although protests were temporarily suspended in April and again in May to facilitate negotiations,¹⁴⁰ their size and resilience reflected many of the same dynamics evident in past elections: a lack of trust in state institutions; a reluctance to accept official tallies, outcomes or judicial decisions; and the prominence of elite bargaining.

This is not to say that UK interventions in this arena were unsuccessful. Support for institutional reform was repeatedly raised by interviewees (local and international) as a clear example of effective engagement. The BHC was able to leverage advantages in access, resources and experience to improve the capacity of regulatory outfits and – by extension – contribute towards a more credible election process. A granular understanding of Kenya's sociopolitical dynamics and relationships with the major players provided a degree of influence and authority even as other donors faced difficulties. Possibly as a result, the UK adopted an increasingly important role in coordinating external interventions, sharing information and aligning messaging at key junctures. Crucially, programming was strategic and well-timed, building on the legacies of past

134. International Crisis Group, 'Kenya's 2022 Election'.

135. Due to the unusual dynamic of a 'long-time opposition leader' backed by Kenya's outgoing president competing against the deputy president. See *AP News Wire*, 'Polls Open in Kenyan Presidential Election Said to be Tight', *The Independent*, 9 August 2022, <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/raila-odinga-ap-polls-uhuru-kenyatta-nairobi-b2141136.html>>, accessed 14 February 2023.

136. Respondents specifically referred to the confusion around IEBC's final announcement of the result, which could have been used as a pretext for intervention.

137. *Al Jazeera*, 'Kenyan Opposition Leader Odinga Says Protests on Despite Police Ban', 27 March 2023.

138. *Al Jazeera*, 'Kenya's Raila Odinga Suspends Anti-Government Protests', 3 April 2023; *Africa News*, 'Kenya's Odinga to Restart Anti-Government Rallies', 29 April 2023.

139. Victor Abuso, 'Kenya: Ruto Appoints Team to Recruit New IEBC Officials, Opposition Cries Foul', *Africa Report*, 2 March 2023.

140. *Al Jazeera*, 'Kenya's Opposition Suspends Protest After Agreement with Government', 4 May 2022.

efforts that stretched over successive electoral cycles. However, it should also be contextualised as subsidiary to, and dependent on, the interaction between political culture, formal institutions and public appetite – dynamics that donors have little control over.

Defence Partnerships and Capacity Building

The British Army has collaborated with AMISOM (now ATMIS) Troop Contributing Countries (TCCs) since 2006/07 to help stabilise Somalia and degrade Al-Shabaab. This is partially facilitated by the BPST-A¹⁴¹ in Nairobi, an MoD and Conflict, Stability, Security Fund (CSSF)-backed unit advising and assisting a range of African security services.¹⁴² Having delivered bespoke training packages for over 19 years, the team's modalities span a variety of needs, from institutional capacity building and bilateral cooperation to preparing troops for specific peace missions. Nested within a wider defence network, both operational and commercial, the approach assumes that strengthening and better integrating African security mechanisms can improve regional stability,¹⁴³ mitigate upstream threats to the UK, provide access to local militaries, and retain or expand political partnerships.¹⁴⁴

Against this backdrop, BPST-A was praised for boosting the competence of recipient security forces at a tactical level via several lines of effort. Under the East Africa Security Programme (2015–21), for example, the team developed a counter improvised explosive device (CIED) wing for the IPSTC, carving a recognised niche in IED disposal to help reduce casualty rates. Since 2016, the scheme has processed more than 4,831 military and police personnel.¹⁴⁵ Likewise, the Africa Peace and Security Programme (2018–21) bolstered regional capabilities, with BPST-A supplying pre-deployment training (PDT) for AMISOM TCCs,

141. Formerly British Peace Support Team – East Africa.

142. As of 2019, BPST-A oversaw 93 peacekeeping and security courses across eastern and southern Africa, reaching around 10,000 personnel and civilians a year with an annual budget of £13 million. See Laura Makin-Isherwood, 'Britain is Still Africa's Military Partner of Choice', *Forces.Net*, 7 August 2019, <<https://www.forces.net/news/britain-still-africas-military-partner-choice>>, accessed 15 February 2023.

143. Interviewees also referenced BPST-A's indirect contributions across multilateral campaigns such as 'Silencing the Guns in Africa' and support for 'African Solutions to African Problems'.

144. Marco Jowell, 'The Unintended Consequences of Foreign Military Assistance in Africa: An Analysis of Peacekeeping Training in Kenya', *Journal of East African Studies* (Vol. 12, No. 1, 2018).

145. See HM Government, 'East Africa Security Programme, Annual Review Summary Sheet', CSSF, 15 July 2021, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/conflict-stability-and-security-fund-africa-annual-review-summaries-2019-to-2020>>, accessed 22 February 2023.

including material on the protection of civilians, international humanitarian law and ‘trauma-informed victim-focused’ methodologies.¹⁴⁶

Aligning with the UK National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (2018–22), the unit also started mainstreaming gender sensitivity across much of its portfolio, helping 3,583 peacekeepers to expand their basic awareness and subscribe to a ‘common understanding of core values in UN/AU missions regarding SEA [sexual exploitation and abuse] and CRSV [conflict-related sexual violence]’.¹⁴⁷ Similar trends were apparent in the KDF specifically. Compared to the ‘grudging acceptance’ previously accompanying one-day gender-centric courses, the revised content was seen as normalised across battle-group training, with BPST-A offering additional standalone sessions to satisfy local appetite and encouraging participants to ‘carry out awareness-raising initiatives within their units’.¹⁴⁸ While learning uptake is difficult to track or quantify as a value-add in an operational sense,¹⁴⁹ anecdotal accounts of positive behavioural change in the field offer at least some validation.¹⁵⁰

Additionally, interviewees often cited the team’s networking as a ‘strong backbone’ for UK influence. Drawing parallels with Zambia and Uganda, some argued the BPST-A–KDF relationship helped expedite high-level communication and enhance the UK’s convening power. References were made to the unit’s head – a colonel – having discussions with Kenya’s Deputy Chief of Defence Staff as a direct measure of access, signalling the prominence of BPST-A as a resource and partner. Of course, such agency should not be overstated: interactions were transactional, based on the desire for particular services, and primarily designed

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146. As noted by interviewees and referenced in HM Government, ‘UK National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security 2018–2022’, Annual Report to Parliament, 2021, p. 51.
147. Mirsad Jacevic et al., ‘Final Evaluation of the United Kingdom’s National Action Plan of Women, Peace and Security: 2018–2022’, Gender Associations International Consulting, June 2022, p. 27.
148. ICAI, ‘Sexual Exploitation and Abuse by International Peacekeepers’, an accompanying report to the ICAI review of the Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative, 30 September 2020. However, others have questioned the scale and sustainability of such changes, for instance see Georgina Holmes, ‘The UK and Sub-Saharan Africa’, Written Evidence, International Relations Defence Committee, House of Commons, 27 April 2020, <<https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/3420/html/>>, accessed 28 July 2023.
149. BPST-A relies on the Training Assessment System for Evaluation and Reporting (TASER), which encompasses several elements drawn from (and building on) the Kirkpatrick Evaluation Model (reaction, learning, behaviour, and results). See Conflict, Stability and Security Fund and FCO, ‘CSSF Annual Review Synthesis Paper: Lessons from the Fund’s Third Year, Joint Funds Unit Management Response’, 22 March 2019, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/joint-funds-unit-management-response-to-cssf-annual-review-synthesis-report-2017-to-2018>>, accessed 22 March 2019. As ICAI cautioned, ‘this is a useful initiative, but limited in scope. It does not yet have a systematic way of tracking the behaviour of peacekeeping troops once they have left training’. See *ibid.*
150. HM Government, ‘UK National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security 2018–2022: Annual Report to Parliament 2021’, p. 58, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1090586/UK_National_Action_Plan_on_Women_Peace_and_Security_2018_to_2022_annual_report_to_Parliament_2021.pdf>, accessed 7 July 2023. Other examples include a female participant leading a ‘prevention project that engages elders in awareness raising about child abuse’. See ICAI, ‘Sexual Exploitation and Abuse by International Peacekeepers’.

to further multilateral outcomes. Nevertheless, they arguably afforded new entry points and capital for bilateral engagement that could feed into – and in some cases lay a baseline for – ‘agenda-swaying’ and incremental normative change.

This influence stems partly from the UK’s long-running ties to the KDF, which are grounded in shared history, genealogy, culture, language and a web of informal associations via Sandhurst and other British military academies. Some of these connections may be fraying in an increasingly saturated donor market, but familiarity among Nairobi’s military elite was seen to still carry weight given the Kenyan army’s idiosyncrasies and patronage systems. Compared to the ‘contractual relationships’ characterising many other funders, the long-term presence of BPST-A and BATUK in Kenya was also viewed as enabling close institutional linkages and ‘brand recognition’. Although the UK cannot compete with the investments and hardware offered by the US, China or Turkey, it has proven effective in specialist training – notably CIED – and displayed impressive flexibility, with interviewees referencing the accommodation of local preferences and adaptation of content where necessary. In contrast to the prescriptive tendencies of larger suppliers, BPST-A’s efforts to ensure inputs match local clients’ needs, expectations and priorities were described as ‘pushing on an open door’ with respondents claiming this elasticity leads to ‘repeat demand’. Additionally, UK-authored AU and UN peace and security doctrines bear similarity with those of the British Army, offering BPST-A some comparative advantage in training and formal accreditation.

That said, the team has previously been criticised for short, piecemeal projects displaying little overarching coherence. Although the CSSF framework should facilitate cross-governmental alignment, interviewees recounted how different strands of Whitehall sent mixed signals and imposed a ‘smorgasbord’ of objectives. As a result, programmes arguably lacked direction and a clear strategy. Past research has also queried whether a tactical organisation should be assuming ad hoc responsibility for high-level engagement and has framed BPST-A as a retrofitted vehicle for sustaining BATUK¹⁵¹ – a task the unit has limited capacity to deliver, due to its specific focus on peace operations. As one respondent summarised, BPST-A ‘should not be a political animal [fronting] big agreements’, but effectively became such due to the BHC’s political arm ‘not pulling its weight’ in the defence space. Others strenuously rejected this characterisation, referencing the High Commissioner’s ‘extraordinary’ support for these processes since 2019 and considerable investment by senior personnel, including the UK defence attaché.

151. See, for example, Abigail Watson and Megan Karlshøj-Pedersen, ‘Fusion Doctrine in Five Steps: Lessons Learned from Remote Warfare in Africa’, Oxford Research Group, October 2019, p. 20; Abigail Watson and Emily Knowles, ‘Improving the UK Offer in Africa: Lessons from Military Partnerships on the Continent’, Oxford Research Group, Remote Warfare Programme, March 2019.

Regardless, such concerns appeared to diminish in recent years, driven in part by FCDO officials under pressure to reduce spending, and reviews flagging the value of a narrower, flexible scope and a need to focus on sustainability via longer-term theories of change. Building on five ‘enduring [country] partnerships’,¹⁵² BPST-A is now looking to ensure that KDF personnel not only retain effective force protection and high standards of conduct, but also field a Mission Support Team for ATMIS. At the same time, attention is reportedly shifting towards ‘train-the-trainer’ (T3) schemes to strengthen self-sufficiency. Instead of a large external team walking battalion-sized contingents through pre-deployment content, classes increasingly feature small mentor groups teaching around 60 Kenyan instructors. Local personnel are slowly being recruited to lead gender awareness training, with the aim of BPST-A transitioning into a quality assurance role; curricula are being designed for the self-delivery of T3 PDT modules; and the KDF have filled 98% of posts in IPSTC’s CIED wing.¹⁵³ Interviewees similarly referenced plans to develop Kenyan schools of infantry and armour.

Nevertheless, challenges remain. Building institutional proficiency presupposes domestic buy-in from Nairobi and adequate screening to select the right candidates for training. Previous assessments expose difficulties, with descriptions of ‘egg-flippers’ (chefs) and other unsuitable participants filling UK courses,¹⁵⁴ and beneficiaries not necessarily going on to expected roles or missions. More broadly, BPST-A’s output is also understandably shaped by the KDF’s preferences and boundaries. While there is scope for some influence and proactivity, this is tempered by the congested disposition of Kenya’s security space and the importance of alignment. Training and procurement are often dependent on the individual whims of KDF commanders, creating issues for continuity and strategic planning. Likewise, there is a tendency for local stakeholders to leverage donor assistance as a means of ‘managing internal rents [and] patrimonial networks’, deterring appetite for self-sufficiency.¹⁵⁵ As a result, respondents questioned how far BPST-A and wider UK defence engagement can stay competitive while engaging with the sensitive issues critical for generating real change.

Although progress has been made in strengthening doctrine, interoperability between Kenya’s various security services,¹⁵⁶ and basic competencies and troop skills, the effect on peacekeeping and broader national defence force development is more ambiguous. The KDF has generally resisted field mentorship or the inclusion of foreign advisers in its activities across southern Somalia, raising

152. Kenya, Ghana, Malawi, Uganda and Zambia.

153. HM Government, ‘East Africa Security Programme, Annual Review Summary Sheet’.

154. Watson and Knowles, ‘Improving the UK Offer in Africa’, p. 3.

155. Jowell, ‘The Unintended Consequences of Foreign Military Assistance in Africa’, p. 130.

156. Frictions between different security forces were perhaps most evident during the Westgate siege in 2013, contributing to delays, confusion, and several ‘blue on blue’ incidents.

challenges for gauging any improvement in performance.¹⁵⁷ To this end, interviewees repeated claims that Kenyan officers ‘could play the UK like a fiddle’ when it came to human rights training, reflecting the the difficulties of discerning perfunctory compliance. Even British soldiers have expressed scepticism over Whitehall’s political will to ‘measure the effects of their training activities with local partners in a way that would capture long-term progress or overarching strategic goals like building accountable, effective, legitimate local security forces’.¹⁵⁸ At the same time, Kenyan army personnel continue to be criticised for corruption, poor resourcing, a lack of mission readiness, and alleged killings, collective punishment and other human rights abuses.¹⁵⁹

This is not a universal indictment, but given the KDF – like many regional militaries – is a ‘complicated national and foreign policy tool used by political elites to further their aims with the added complication of significant pressures and competing interests’,¹⁶⁰ it is unlikely that technical fixes or training exercises can transform the prevailing culture of domestic institutions in isolation.

Evidently, BPST-A has proven effective at a tactical and doctrinal level, bolstering the capabilities of the KDF and regional peacekeeping forces while offering inroads for wider British diplomacy. Although constrained by the need for alignment, the team’s specialisms, networking and credibility provide some opportunity to push normative change, as shown by the gradual uptake of gender-responsive content. However, in the absence of longitudinal analysis and a lack of access to Kenyan military assets across Somalia, the impact on operational performance is less clear.

More positively, internal reforms within BPST-A – partly driven by cross-governmental working – have restructured UK engagement as part of a broader push for long-term capacity-building. While the KDF turned to IPSTC (rather than British advisers) for support with deployments in the eastern region of the DRC,¹⁶¹ the argument could be made that this shift reflects the very self-sufficiency BPST-A has been pursuing, with IPSTC – a product of donor funding and expertise

157. ICAI, ‘Sexual Exploitation and Abuse by International Peacekeepers’.

158. See Watson and Knowles, ‘Improving the UK Offer in Africa’, p. 2.

159. As Transparency International notes, ‘despite ... formally strong codes of conduct for civilian and military personnel ... enforcement appears to be lacking’. See Transparency International, ‘Kenya: Government Defence Integrity Index: Country Brief: Kenya’, 2020, <https://ti-defence.org/gdi/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2021/11/Kenya_GDI-2020-Brief.pdf>, accessed 14 February 2023, p. 5. Similarly, ‘human rights groups, local media and the [UN] have documented dozens of allegations of abuse by the Kenyan security forces, including ... alleged enforced or involuntary disappearance since 1980’, raising concerns these ‘clampdowns’ could radicalise subject populations. See Max Bearak, ‘In Kenya’s Battle Against Al-Shabab, Locals Say the Military is Fighting Terror with Terror’, *Washington Post*, 3 November 2019.

160. Jowell, ‘The Unintended Consequences of Foreign Military Assistance in Africa’, p. 13.

161. Under both the East African Community Regional Force in Eastern DRC (EACRF-DRC) and the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO).

now led by Kenyans themselves – becoming the army’s ‘go to’ service provider. At the same time, the scope of UK defence cooperation is also changing. Leaning into the personalised, informal systems underpinning KDF decision-making can offer greater access and – perhaps over time – influence, but risks perpetuating the same dynamics that impede Kenya’s military professionalisation. To mitigate or prevent such issues, interviewees noted ongoing efforts to frame the MoD’s ‘regional hub’ concept more formally with Nairobi, ensuring shared alignment and clear parameters for collaboration.

Education

Kenya has a complex and comparatively impressive education system that is experiencing a rapid expansion in tertiary enrolment, unusually high rates of per-capita spending and nearly ‘universal levels’ of government-sponsored primary schooling.¹⁶² Aligned with (and predating) the Millennium Development Goals and the 2000 ‘Education for All’ Dakar agreement,¹⁶³ State House policies have long focused on improving quality and coverage, with President Kibaki dedicating 17.4% of public expenditure to the task in 2005 alone¹⁶⁴ and making education central to Kenya’s ‘Vision 2030’ framework. Similar spending patterns were continued by President Kenyatta, who launched a new ‘competence-based curriculum’ in 2017¹⁶⁵ – including a massive overhaul of the 32-year-old ‘8-4-4 system’ – and maintained an education budget of ‘twice the combined allocations for defence, health, and the presidency’ (roughly 5.3% of GDP) in 2018.¹⁶⁶

However, discrepancies in access, standards, retention and completion rates persist – particularly along a rural–urban axis – as do chronic problems of understaffing. Crucially, such issues are also tied to the broader marginalisation of Kenya’s peripheries, with regional inequalities affecting all learning outcomes. In Garissa, Wajir and Mandera, poverty rates are roughly double the national average, while infrastructure, health and employment indicators lag behind the

162. Helen Grant and Emiliana Vegas, ‘Why Governments Should Use Evidence to Design Girls’ Education Policies – and Learn from Kenya about How to Do it’, Brookings, 2021.

163. World Education Forum, ‘The Dakar Framework for Action’, 2000. Similar aims were subsequently captured by the Sustainable Development Goals.

164. Ishmael Munene, ‘Kibaki’s Kenya Education Legacy: Well-Intentioned, With Disastrous Consequences’, *The Conversation*, 26 April 2022, <<https://theconversation.com/kibakis-kenya-education-legacy-well-intentioned-with-disastrous-consequences-181847>>, accessed 7 July 2023.

165. Rolled out in phases, the new curriculum pushed learners to construct ‘their own knowledge and skills through exposure to challenging situations and experience[s]’ and adapted to ‘the changing needs of students by encouraging innovativeness and creativity’. See Janerose Mutegi Kibaara, ‘Kenya’s School Reform is Entering a New Phase in 2023 – But the Country is Not Ready’, *The Conversation*, 18 January 2023.

166. Moses Ngware, ‘Where Kenya is Spending Money on Education – and What’s Missing’, *The Conversation*, 14 November 2019, <<https://theconversation.com/where-kenya-is-spending-money-on-education-and-whats-missing-119393>>, accessed 7 July 2023.

rest of the country.¹⁶⁷ Only 37% of eligible children across the northeast are enrolled in primary school,¹⁶⁸ and gender disparities remain significant. Despite rough parity at the state level, disadvantage, discrimination and local socio-culturally determined gender norms in low-income areas either limit female participation from the outset or hinder learning and grade progression. In tracts of the arid or semi-arid land lining the Somali border, girls ‘make up less than 30% of those taking secondary exams’.¹⁶⁹

Against this backdrop, Whitehall is working to improve the availability, equity and capacity of Kenyan schooling, as recently outlined by the Integrated Review,¹⁷⁰ the International Development Strategy¹⁷¹ and the Girls’ Education Action Plan 2022–2026. Although the UK is often framed as Nairobi’s staple ‘partner for primary and early child education’ due to shared history and institutional commonalities, interviewees acknowledged a fluctuation in British engagement over time. Crucially, UK funding for Kenya’s Ministry of Education (MoE) was suspended in 2010 following suspected corruption and misappropriation.¹⁷² While both centrally managed and multilateral engagement continued, respondents recounted how mission-led programming across the sector was largely shelved after 2014/15. Several also questioned the real extent of UK influence given the increasingly diverse engagement of different donors and private foundations.

Various UK-backed interventions nevertheless appear to have enhanced the supply and quality of Kenyan education by strengthening regulatory mechanisms, teaching methods and inclusivity. The Tusome [Let’s Read] initiative, a national early-literacy improvement scheme sponsored by USAID and DFID – in partnership with the Research Triangle Institute (RTI) and the MoE – aimed to supplement domestic reforms and boost learning outcomes for approximately seven million children between grades one and three.¹⁷³ Launched in 2014 as a follow-up to the Kenya Primary Math and Reading (PRIMR) programme (2012–2015),¹⁷⁴ the project focused on developing teachers’ capacity to deliver competence-

167. Abdullahi Abdille, ‘The Hidden Cost of Al-Shabaab’s Campaign in North-Eastern Kenya’, International Crisis Group, April 2019.

168. *Ibid.*

169. Girls’ Education Challenge, ‘Kenya’, <<https://girlseducationchallenge.org/countries/country/kenya>>, accessed 16 February 2023.

170. HM Government, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age*.

171. FCDO, ‘The UK Government’s Strategy for international Development’.

172. A 2009 fiduciary review by the Kenyan Ministry of Finance ‘uncovered substantial financial mis-management and fraud’ by MoE. DFID formally terminated its ongoing Kenya Education Sector Support Programme (KESSP) in 2010 and cut budgetary support for governmental institutions. See HM Government, ‘Kenya Essential Education Programme (KEEP), Business Case and Intervention Summary’, Development Tracker, <<https://devtracker.fcdo.gov.uk/projects/GB-1-202657/documents>>, accessed 23 February 2023.

173. Grant and Vegas, ‘Why Governments Should Use Evidence to Design Girls’ Education Policies’.

174. PRIMR was one strand of the wider Kenya Essential Education Programme (KEEP), a four-year, £39.2-million initiative launched by DFID in 2012 to ‘support improved access to quality basic education for the most marginalised children in Kenya as well as enhance equity and accountability within the

based curricula; expanding the availability of learning materials, instructional support and supervision; and encouraging collaboration with other relevant stakeholders ‘throughout all levels of the education system’.¹⁷⁵ This built on cost-effective elements of PRIMR that could be delivered through existing government structures, adapting student textbooks, teacher guides and training templates to operate at scale. Though USAID provided the bulk of funding and implementation (DFID covered around a fifth of the overall budget),¹⁷⁶ UK stakeholders were credited with helping facilitate a shift away from rote learning. From baseline to endline, pupils displayed statistically significant improvement, with the delivery of Tusome in the classroom positively correlating with reading fluency.¹⁷⁷ The British Council’s concurrent £1.8 million ‘Teacher Performance and Integrity in Kenya Programme’ (TePIK, 2013–15) also mitigated levels of absenteeism and desertion, introducing a new appraisal and development system (‘TAD’) across six pilot counties in partnership with the Teachers Service Commission.¹⁷⁸ More than 75% of participating schools recorded upgrades in academic performance.¹⁷⁹

Similarly, the UK has tried to increase girls’ access to education, financing a cluster of projects under the umbrella of DFID (now FCDO)’s Girls’ Education Challenge (GEC) since 2012. Now in the second stage of a 12-year life cycle, activities delivered via the GEC-Transition Phase II and LNGB (Leave No Girl Behind) initiative¹⁸⁰ collectively engage more than 330,000 vulnerable beneficiaries, enabling their transition from basic to secondary learning, and supporting their literacy, numeracy, agency and empowerment.¹⁸¹

sector’. Phase 2 (2015–16) received an additional £14 million in funding to improve learning outcomes, support low-cost private schools, expand educational access in arid and semi-arid lands, and introduce new climate adaption/mitigation schemes. See HM Government, ‘Kenya Essential Education Programme (KEEP), Annual Review Summary Sheet’, Development Tracker, October 2015, <<https://devtracker.fcdo.gov.uk/projects/GB-1-202657/documents/>>, accessed 14 February 2023.

175. RTI International, ‘Tusome Early Grade Reading Activity Achieves Substantial Reading Gains in English and Kiswahili’, <<https://www.rti.org/impact/tusome-improving-early-grade-learning-kenya>>, accessed 14 February 2023.
176. FCDO, ‘Kenya Essential Education Programme (KEEP): Annual Review Summary Sheet’, Development Tracker, October 2015, <https://iati.fcdo.gov.uk/iati_documents/5204541.odt>, accessed 14 February 2023.
177. Erika Keaveney et al., ‘Tusome External Evaluation Endline Report’, USAID, 2020, <https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00XVBP.pdf>, accessed 14 February 2023.
178. British Council, ‘Teacher Performance and Integrity in Kenya Programme’, <www.britishcouncil.org/partner/track-record/teacher-performance-and-integrity-kenya-programme>, accessed 16 February 2023.
179. Dorothy Owuor Jonyo and Bonn Jonyo, ‘Performance Management in Kenyan Public Schools: Implications and Challenges’, *European Journal of Educational Sciences* (Vol. 4, No. 3, September 2017), p. 23.
180. At a global level, GEC-T Phase II supports 27 ‘successful’ GEC Phase I projects across 14 countries in helping girls transition to the next stage of their education. LNGB includes 14 projects in 10 countries to support up to 200,000 highly marginalised, adolescent girls who have never attended or have already dropped out of school. See Florian Poli et al, ‘Independent Evaluation of the Girls’ Education Challenge Phase II – Aggregate Impact of GEC-T Projects Between Baseline and Midline Study – Final Report’, Tetra Tech, August 2022.
181. Girls’ Education Challenge, ‘Kenya’.

GEC’s early stages were criticised for weak coherence, coordination and sustainability, with evaluators describing ‘limited work to support institutional change’ (for example, via the Global Partnership for Education) due in part to inadequate communication between Whitehall and the DFID country office.¹⁸² Several projects, including the first iteration of iMlango (2013–17), an e-learning initiative, lacked the necessary development, gender and education expertise among staff.¹⁸³ Other nominally ‘girl-focused’ interventions like the UK’s Kenya Essential Education Programme (2012–16) displayed poor mechanics and targeting.¹⁸⁴

However, analysis of GEC II suggests progression, even when set against mounting contextual difficulties. As Table 2 shows, these efforts contributed to improved education services, teaching methods, public and parental awareness, and learning outcomes. Though the efficacy of individual activities varied, GEC’s feedback loops, long timeframe and phased approach enabled gradual adaptation. Stakeholders were also able to largely mitigate the disruptive impact of Covid-19, shifting content online or supplying ‘printed materials ... and setting up book borrowing systems’ in areas that lacked internet access.¹⁸⁵ Around 85% of girls participating in the scheme successfully continued to secondary school,¹⁸⁶ and in many cases took non-formal options such as apprenticeships and vocational training.

Table 2: Girls’ Education Challenge Programming in Kenya

| Project | Lead Partner | Window | Dates | Overview |
|--------------------|-------------------------|--------|---------|---|
| Education for Life | ActionAid International | LNGB | 2018–23 | <p>Worked with up to 5,000 highly marginalised 10–19-year old, out-of-school girls and 500 boys in the counties of Isiolo, Garissa, Migori, Kisumu and Kilifi. Of these, 1,500 of the girls and all 500 of the boys were children with disabilities. The EfL project offered both out-of-school learning activities and improvements to existing school provision to address teaching quality, curricula, school environments and management practices.</p> <p>Learning gains were reported in both Kiswahili and English, with an improvement of 15%. Numeracy scores also improved by 16.4%.</p> |

182. ICAI, ‘Accessing, Staying and Succeeding in Basic Education – UK Aid’s Support to Marginalised Girls’, 2016, pp. 19–20.

183. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

184. *Ibid.*

185. R Booth, ‘Emerging Issues for Girls’ Education in East Africa’, K4D Emerging Issues Report, Institute of Development Studies, 2022.

186. Girls’ Education Challenge, ‘Country Briefing: Kenya’, January 2022, p. 2, <https://girlseducationchallenge.org/media/o2fh5r55/gec_country_briefing_-_kenya_jan-22_final.pdf>, accessed 7 July 2023.

| Project | Lead Partner | Window | Dates | Overview |
|--|------------------------------|--------|---------|--|
| iMlango | Avanti Communications Group | GEC-T | 2017–21 | <p>The project provided schools with satellite broadband and computer labs, which allowed students to use an online portal for tutoring in maths and literacy.</p> <p>Increased numbers of girls (75%) reported they were doing better in their schoolwork in 2021 than 2020. Of the students surveyed, 99.5% agreed that they would like to continue their education.</p> |
| Discovery Project | Impact(Ed) International | | 2017–20 | <p>Supported marginalised girls to improve their literacy and numeracy skills, develop their life skills and raise their aspirations. Impact(Ed) International’s approach combined professional development of teachers and video technology and teaching resources.</p> <p>Midline evaluation reported a positive impact on numeracy outcomes (in the district of Wajir).</p> |
| Expanding Inclusive Education Strategies for Girls with Disabilities Kenya | Leonard Cheshire | | 2017–22 | <p>Aimed to increase the educational and vocational opportunities of girls with disabilities in five counties within the Lake Region. It tackled the specific barriers that girls with disabilities face to improve their quality of life, skills and livelihood opportunities.</p> <p>63.2% of girls with disabilities improved their literacy scores and 66.2% demonstrated increased in numeracy scores. By midline 90.6% of girls with disabilities viewed their schools as supportive (up from 56.8% at baseline).</p> |
| Jielimishe (Educate Yourself) | I Choose Life – Africa (ICL) | | 2017–22 | <p>Aimed to improve the life chances of 10,120 marginalised girls in primary and secondary school, allowing them to complete a full cycle of education and transition to the next level, including alternative pathways such as technical and vocational education and training. The approach focused on increasing girls’ motivation to learn through girls’ clubs and mentorship schemes; improving the quality of teaching through teacher training, coaching and mentorship; and encouraging local communities to support girls’ education.</p> <p>Teacher training and coaching interventions increased the number of teachers (68.3%) using learner-centred methodologies. 74% of parents stated they increased spending on their daughters’ education.</p> |

| Project | Lead Partner | Window | Dates | Overview |
|--|--|--------|---------|---|
| Let Our Girls Succeed (Wasichana Wetu Wafaulu) | Education Development Trust (EDT) | | 2017–23 | <p>Worked with highlighting marginalised girls living in ASALs (arid and semi-arid lands) and slum areas in Kenya. It provided primary school girls with the qualifications, skills and confidence necessary to successfully transition to a productive next phase of life.</p> <p>Girls sustained learning throughout the school closure, even gaining slightly in numeracy skills compared to the midline evaluation.</p> |
| Kenya Equity in Education Project (KEEP) | World University Service Canada (WUSC) | | 2017–22 | <p>Supported girls from Kakuma and Dadaab refugee camps and the surrounding communities to stay in school and attain functional literacy and numeracy. It focused on girls, mainly adolescents, who are at the highest risk of dropping out of school.</p> <p>Learning outcomes from baseline to midline increased by 10.6 percentage points for literacy (surpassing the target) and 4.6 percentage points for numeracy. Conditional Cash Transfers had a positive effect on attendance rates and girls demonstrated acquisition of confidence and skills to better organised themselves and participate in school.</p> |

Sources: Transcribed from Girls' Education Challenge, 'Kenya'; Girls' Education Challenge, 'Country Briefing: Kenya'.

In the case of each initiative – Tusome, TePIK and GEC II – UK engagement benefited from clear alignment with Kenyan interests. The BHC was described as providing a granular understanding of provincial politics and priorities, with support for teacher management tallying with Nairobi’s National Education Strategic Plan and elite preferences at county level. This allowed external interventions to work through – rather than around – domestic infrastructure, enhancing local ownership and scalability. Though the suspension of mission-led programming restricted how far ‘system-led approaches’ could be applied, efforts were increasingly made to sustain results, with GEC II projects reaching out to the MoE and the Teachers Service Commission to institutionalise new policies, clubs and coaching models.¹⁸⁷ Since 2019, this logic – referenced in the International Development Strategy – has been deliberately integrated across UK projects from the design stage to mitigate dependency, ensuring foreign inputs are steered by the Kenyan state and internalised where possible.¹⁸⁸ This has gradually helped national partners to embed gender-sensitive programmes and gender-responsive pedagogy across schools – from teaching methods to curricula and administration – fostering an environment conducive to girls’ education. Coverage has sometimes proved more superficial than effective, and regional asymmetries remain acute in areas such as the northeast, but interviewees highlighted numerous Kenyan-led initiatives now building on these foundations.¹⁸⁹

Additionally, the UK is among the few donors operating in and prioritising so-called ‘forgotten’ counties. Alongside a comparatively high-risk appetite, respondents referenced the networks and relationships that practitioners can leverage to gain access in the first place. Given the UK’s devolution support and sub-national investments, the Commission’s education team could draw on close ties to the relevant gatekeepers – governors and ministers – necessary for signing off on project delivery. Where these were lacking, counterparts in the ‘governance team’ helped convene meetings, ‘open doors’ and expedite approval, facilitating buy-in from national and local leaders to ‘champion implementation’. That said, this complementarity had limits. For instance, it reportedly took time to bridge siloes between UK education and security programming, despite Al-Shabaab attacks driving away teachers and leaving schools in northern Kenya chronically understaffed.¹⁹⁰

A similar disconnect was evident with those engaged in social protection and poverty alleviation, detracting from opportunities to empower girls more

187. Girls’ Education Challenge, ‘Country Briefing: Kenya’, January 2022.

188. The mission’s first bilateral education programme since 2014 is reportedly under design, although no funds will go directly to the MoE, reflecting a clear tension between the desire for local ownership and the practicalities of working with and through government institutions.

189. Including a national ‘Return to School for Girls’ campaign.

190. International Crisis Group, ‘How to Shield Education from Al-Shabaab in Kenya’s Northeast’, Briefing No. 159, 22 July 2020.

holistically. Fragmentation was not just a structural problem within the Commission but was viewed as symptomatic of centrally prescribed ‘handrails’ imposed by London. Though female education has been a longstanding priority for UK foreign policy, and arguably fared better than many other sectors when it came to budget cuts, the parameters of engagement were not necessarily flexible enough to accommodate context-specific solutions. GEC’s theory of change delineated between different barriers – from the individual level to those of the household, community and wider system¹⁹¹ – but interviewees suggested the complex socioeconomic and cultural dynamics conditioning girls’ attendance in Kenya could not always be addressed within the confines of ‘education-focused’ programming.

In summary, the UK’s contribution to local education – a key part of its role as a ‘force for good’ under the Integrated Review – appears to have elicited broadly positive results. Focusing on Kenya’s social and geographic peripheries, interventions have boosted the quality and accessibility of schooling, exploiting comparative advantages such as familiarity, networking and technical expertise to improve learning outcomes. While imperfect, coordination across the High Commission accelerated access, buy-in and project delivery. Although the suspension of mission-led activities in 2014 hampered coverage, the UK’s support role in multilateral initiatives such as Tusome and use of the transnational GEC campaign allowed it to plug gaps in donor and state programming. Of course, these inputs were delivered in the context of huge structural reforms driven by Nairobi since 2013 (and scaled up in 2017) and clearly benefited from pushing at an ‘open door’.¹⁹² Where alignment was weaker, particularly in relation to regional inequalities, progress appeared more measured. Nevertheless, interviewees noted tangible examples of improved capacity, scope and inclusivity within Kenya’s education system, due partly to long-term, consistent commitment and the necessary flexibility to build on lessons learned. In turn, these promising outcomes were seen to generate ‘prestige’, credibility and diplomatic capital for the UK to leverage during the 2021 Global Education Summit.

191. These included economic, cultural, educational, logistical and institutional barriers. See Pauline Rose et al, ‘Independent Evaluation of the Girls’ Education Challenge Phase II – Teachers and Teaching for Marginalised Girls: Annexes’, Tetra Tech International Development, December 2021, <https://girlseducationchallenge.org/media/4etc5rwu/gec-ii-evaluation-study-2-teachers-and-teaching-annexes_dec2021.pdf>, accessed 15 February 2023.

192. Grant and Vegas, ‘Why Governments Should Use Evidence to Design Girls’ Education Policies’; Darius Mogaka Ogutu, ‘Education System Change: Perspectives from Kenya’, Brookings, 3 August 2017.

III. Enabling and Constraining Factors

The UK has progressed some of the goals set out in the Strategic Partnership and the wider Global Britain agenda. Long-term relationship-building, coordination with external parties and politically ‘smart’, adaptable approaches allowed British stakeholders to carve distinct roles in an otherwise crowded donor space. Diplomatic, defence and development inputs were at times – and with exceptions – mutually reinforcing and benefited from both high-level engagement from Whitehall and the clout, capabilities and sensitivity of country teams. However, discernible changes in the UK–Kenya partnership also raise questions around the assumptions framing British engagement. Building on additional interview data and the analysis in Chapter II, Chapter III examines the operating context and the UK’s wider strategy, resources, structure and relationships, exploring how these condition action in Kenya.

Operating Context

Following the Tigray conflict in Ethiopia, Kenya has increasingly become the preeminent ‘donor darling’ of eastern Africa, providing financial opportunities, stability, and a comparatively robust model of democracy and judicial independence. Historical ties, personal affinities, institutional linkages, and (broad) political alignment between London and Nairobi likewise offer a conducive environment for cooperation, at least in theory, across what is now the region’s largest ‘economic success story’.¹⁹³

However, these conditions are not static. (Relatively) consistent growth in Kenya’s revenue base and economic output have reduced British funding – both commercial and ODA – to a marginal proportion of Nairobi’s overall budget.¹⁹⁴ Long-running efforts to defuse tensions with Kenyatta made progress, but the fallout from the 2013 (and subsequent) elections exposed the UK’s vulnerability

193. As the Coalition for Global Prosperity writes, ‘a GDP of over \$110 billion and an average annual growth rate of nearly 6% in the decade preceding the COVID-19 pandemic’ makes Kenya ‘one of Africa’s biggest economic success stories’. See Coalition for Global Prosperity, ‘Outcompeting Strategic Challengers: The Case of China in Africa’, p.22, <<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59a5384b03596ef2c22278e4/t/641c2a9ae3ac6e7e55792c57/1679567532050/UK+China+in+Kenya+Report.pdf>>, accessed 7 February 2023.

194. In contrast to smaller post-colonial states like Malawi.

to an anti-colonial backlash. Additionally, the legacies of Kibaki's 'Look East' strategy accelerated competition from alternative suppliers that were often described as better able to satisfy elite interests, namely cheap loans, vanity projects and liquidity for local patronage. Amid a 'second scramble for Africa', State House is therefore able to navigate and exploit rival offers, with interviewees citing a reduction in the resonance and leverage of 'Western experts and ideas'. While public concern over debt arguably diminished appetite for Chinese lending¹⁹⁵ – the Strategic Partnership with London notably coincided with the expiry of Kenya's 'grace period' on repayments – the UK continues to be one player among many.

More recently, steep commodity prices associated with the war in Ukraine have exacerbated living costs and resource shortages, 'reversing the benefits of Kenya's tentative recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic'.¹⁹⁶ With the longest drought in decades depleting livestock and grain yields, and fuelling conflict over water and pasture, the government declared a 'national disaster' in September 2021.¹⁹⁷ In Turkana alone, more than 500,000 face 'dire' levels of food insecurity.¹⁹⁸

Though the poverty rate dropped to 33.4% in 2022,¹⁹⁹ and most social indicators suggest improvement, inequality in Kenya also remains 'extreme'. At the national and county level, powerbrokers have a direct stake in maintaining the neo-patrimonial framework on 'which their political and economic privileges depend'.²⁰⁰ At the same time, rising expectations and loyalty fees²⁰¹ – precipitated in part by democratisation – are pushing elites to 'consum[e] the state to pay for their political ambitions',²⁰² propelling prolific levels of graft. Displaying increased scale and sophistication, corruption was considered near-ubiquitous, with respondents referencing a proliferation of 'briefcase companies' – many affiliated to senior politicians – leaking money from public services and parastatals, or exploiting the opacity of Chinese-backed 'white elephant' schemes. Kickbacks were allegedly 'budgeted' into official contracts and, despite intermittent

195. Debt service costs consume about half of projected revenue in Kenya's 2022–23 budget. See Kell, 'Kenya's Debt Struggles Go Far Deeper Than Chinese Loans'; Karoline Eickhoff, 'Chinese Mega Projects in Kenya: Public Controversies Around Infrastructure and Debt in East Africa's Regional Hub', *Megatrends Afrika*, Policy Brief No. 4, May 2022.

196. International Crisis Group, 'Kenya's 2022 Election'.

197. *Ibid.*, p. 7; International Crisis Group, 'Investing in Climate Adaptation and Resilience as a Bulwark Against Conflict', Watch List 2022, Autumn Update, 10 October 2022.

198. Bakari Ang-ela, 'More Than 500,000 Residents of Turkana in Dire Need of Relief Aid', *The Standard*, 2023.

199. Brian Ambani, 'Kenya Poverty to Fall to Five-Year Low Next Year', *Nation*, 4 May 2022.

200. Cheeseman, Kanyinga and Lynch, 'The Political Economy of Kenya', p. 18.

201. Within the context of a 'political marketplace', where systems of governance are defined by 'monetised transactional politics', loyalties and services are often 'sold to the highest bidder according to the laws of supply and demand'. See Alex de Waal et al., 'A Theory of Change for Violent Political Marketplaces', Conflict Research Programme, London School of Economics, 19 February 2020, p. 3.

202. Alex de Waal, 'The Future of Ethiopia: Developmental State or Political Marketplace?', World Peace Foundation, 2018.

crackdowns,²⁰³ much of Kenya's regulatory infrastructure was seen as cosmetic or obsolete, reflecting a broader pattern of 'state capture', where mechanisms such as the Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission are susceptible to hollowing out from the top down.²⁰⁴ This risks deterring foreign direct investment²⁰⁵ and – as outlined – occasionally discourages donors from working through government systems altogether, with knock-on effects for sustainability. Where there is accountability, practitioners cited bottlenecks and bureaucratic delays from 'no one wanting to take responsibility'.

Additionally, several participants referenced weaknesses in Kenyan civil society, stemming back to a raft of endogenous problems. In contrast to the 1990s – characterised by a coherent, broad-based push for multiparty elections and greater liberalisation – activism now reportedly lacks a shared agenda or 'rallying cry'. Although CSOs multiplied between 1990 and 2012, many became apathetic, fragmented, or – in some cases – politicised or ethno-centric. Perhaps most evident under the Jubilee government, local movements were routinely co-opted or sidelined, with several facing deregistration by the NGO Board.²⁰⁶ Mainline churches and religious leaders – a previous source of civic mobilisation – were similarly 'enmeshed in networks of patronage' and 'vulnerab[le] to state intimidation',²⁰⁷ shrinking space for mass organisation.²⁰⁸ At the same time, donors refocused investment towards new county infrastructure or often withdrew under pressure from Nairobi, starving groups of resources and political cover. For example, Kenyatta's warning not to contravene Kenyan sovereignty ahead of the 2017 elections precipitated a slump in funding for voter education.²⁰⁹ Additionally, inter-generational cleavages, declining membership, and the dilution of traditional authority structures via social media were blamed for sapping much of the energy needed to drive bottom-up reform.

Even if amenable in broad terms, Kenya therefore poses a challenge for external engagement, especially when focusing on governance or contested political

203. For instance, Kenya's (former) finance minister was arrested over allegations of corruption in 2019.

204. As referenced by interviewees and analysed in Wachira Maina, 'State Capture: Inside Kenya's Inability to Fight Corruption', Africa Centre for Open Governance, May 2019. Roughly a third of the government budget was reportedly lost to corruption in 2016. See Duncan Miriri, 'Third of Kenyan Budget Lost to Corruption: Anti-Graft Chief', *Reuters*, 10 March 2016.

205. Several participants cast Rwanda as a 'dreamland' in comparison. Stefan Dercon likewise refers to recent growth in the Kenyan economy 'despite the state and politics, not because of it'. See Dercon, *Gambling on Development*.

206. A number of cases were eventually deemed 'unconstitutional, null and void' by the High Court. See Civicus, 'Human Rights NGOs Face Closure and Possible Arrest of Their Leadership'; Katharine Houreld and Humphrey Malalo, 'Kenyan Government Suspends Action Against Rights Groups', *Reuters*, 16 August 2017.

207. Described by interviewees and outlined in Cheeseman, Lynch and Willis, *The Moral Economy of Elections in Africa*, p. 202.

208. See Godfrey Musila, 'Freedoms Under Threat: The Spread of Anti-NGO Measures in Africa', Special Report, Freedom House, 2019.

209. Cheeseman, Lynch and Willis, *The Moral Economy of Elections in Africa*, p. 186.

issues. The UK has demonstrated greater contextual sensitivity since 2013, but national elites are increasingly adept at leveraging populism, economic autonomy and international competition to manage or constrain outside influence. Nor should close alignment between London and Nairobi always be assumed, especially in relation to progressive social policies, from improving inclusivity to pushing human rights and reducing inequality.

Strategy

As illustrated in Chapter I, the UK has a range of strategic interests in Nairobi, from maintaining defence cooperation and military access to dealing with poverty, promoting democratisation, improving social infrastructure and mitigating shared security threats, including transnational crime and terrorism. Kenya remains a vital commercial hub, receives the greatest number of British ‘aid-for-trade’ programmes in sub-Saharan Africa,²¹⁰ and is among the few African countries name-checked in both the Integrated Review and the International Development Strategy.

However, the hierarchy of British objectives is not always clear.²¹¹ Since the fallout of 2013, the UK has been blamed by some for prioritising relations with State House over accountability and reform. Despite local opposition, donors were viewed as reluctant to address the ‘Building Bridges Initiative’ (BBI) – a suite of proposed constitutional changes that included expanding the executive and abolishing the National Police Service Commission.²¹² Similarly, practitioners queried how far the UK followed up its rubric of ‘open societies’ with real political or financial pressure. While interviewees cited anecdotal examples of support for previously ‘blacklisted’ CSOs, there appeared to be little appetite for interfering in more sensitive domestic affairs, particularly during Jubilee’s second term. Given uncertainty over British priorities, one participant suggested that the BHC could not always count on Whitehall’s backing, should it press such matters. Several also challenged the UK’s ‘moral authority’ and credibility on these issues,

210. That is, development assistance strengthening the capacity of recipient states to benefit from international trade. See ICAI, ‘Approach Paper: UK Aid for Trade’, <<https://icai.independent.gov.uk/html-version/uk-aid-for-trade/>>, accessed 20 February 2023.

211. Similar points were made by the Coalition of Global Prosperity, which suggested that ‘since the publication of the Integrated Review, not enough has been done to ensure the strategic alignment of country-specific interventions with the priorities of the Integrated Review, thus undermining the coherence of efficacy of the UK’s engagement with a country like Kenya’. See Coalition for Global Prosperity, ‘Outcompeting Strategic Challengers’, p. 33.

212. Police oversight would have transferred to a ‘Kenya Security Council’ chaired by the Interior Cabinet Secretary, effectively consolidating ‘total control’ of the National Police Service (NPS) under the Executive. See Demas Kiprono, ‘BBI Proposal to Phase Out NPSC a Bad Idea’, *The Standard*, 2021.

referencing London's role as a 'laundromat for illicit finance'²¹³ and the colonial legacies still conditioning Kenyan law enforcement and Provincial Administration.

Of course, the UK is not the only Western mission wary of 'locking horns' with Nairobi as it strives to stay competitive, and respondents stressed the value of a constructive, 'dialogue-led approach' to bilateral engagement, with criticism delivered 'behind closed doors'. Nevertheless, academics, activists and NGO workers questioned whether 'quiet diplomacy' risked further relegating governance concerns in favour of stability and trade.²¹⁴

In many respects, the UK has already shown a propensity to push at an 'open door', focusing on shared defence, diplomatic and development goals that do not necessarily infringe on elite interests. Evidently, multi-year programmes and investment cycles, trust building, and strategic engagement with local partners have produced – and occasionally prompted – positive outcomes. For instance, a longstanding British commitment to the prevention of sexual and gender-based violence, the diligent work of local staff, and the UK's relations with the Ministry of the Interior, were praised for playing a significant role in the creation of National Police Service gender helpdesks and Kenya's first 'one-stop' service provider – POLICARE – for victim support. But other 'successes' – enhancements in education, health, devolution and electoral fidelity – mapped onto a pre-existing domestic drive for change. Where buy-in proved weaker – whether due to structural antipathy, scepticism, low absorptive capacity or a lack of grassroots pressure – progress was correspondingly limited. Anti-corruption efforts were often considered nominal at best, akin in many cases to 'motion without movement', as technical engagement by donors found little purchase countering cronyism and high-level complicity. Police reforms saw improvement in oversight, training and community outreach, but rarely translated into greater public trust or shifts in the working culture of security institutions.²¹⁵ Constrained by the inherent difficulties of external programming, and reluctance to 'rock the boat', such activities largely remain at the margins: contributing to

213. House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, 'The Cost of Complacency: Illicit Finance and the War in Ukraine', Second Report of Session, 2022–23.

214. Although focusing on Western engagement with authoritarian regimes, Cheeseman and Desrosiers map a similar propensity among donors to 'prioritise stability and security in foreign policy' or become fixated with bureaucratic politics and technical outcomes. See Nic Cheeseman and Marie-Eve Desrosiers, 'How Not to Engage with Authoritarian States', Westminster Foundation for Democracy and FCDO, February 2023.

215. Between 2017 and October 2022, the Police Reform Working Group in Kenya documented 1,264 cases of extrajudicial killings and 237 'enforced disappearances', although the real number is likely far higher. Reflecting the scale of the problem, President Ruto dissolved the 'Special Services Unit' and Flying-Squad Sub-Units of the NPS a month into office – the third outfit affiliated with the Directorate of Criminal Investigations to be 'disbanded under a cloud in the last 13 years'. The armed forest and game park rangers, KDF and Anti-Terrorism Police Unit have all likewise been implicated in criminal activity. See Naomi van Stapele, 'Kenya: Police Killings Point to Systemic Rot and a Failed Justice System', *The Conversation*, 31 October 2022.

incremental progress without systemically reshaping norms, incentives and behaviour.

Additionally, interviewees saw UK strategy as progressively centralised, compelling in-country teams to operate within ‘handrails’ exported from Whitehall. Designed to streamline coverage and ringfence certain budgets,²¹⁶ the framework was deemed generic and impractical. Quasi-governmental entities like the British Council experienced similar issues, with respondents querying whether new requirements around key performance indicators and an increasingly prescriptive approach by FCDO risked undermining its autonomy and reputation. Although the Strategic Partnership set contours for UK engagement, this rigid policymaking seemed to accentuate the impact of ministerial turnover, leading in some cases to a lack of consistency and forward planning. At the same time, ‘Global Britain’s’ emphasis on commercialisation, and a surge in Kenya’s own bargaining power, reconfigured the relationship around an increasingly transactional logic that pushed the UK into more explicit economic and financial competition with China and the US.

Resources

Development assistance has long factored into UK influence across Kenya, but it did not necessarily guarantee much sway. Even before the recent reductions, Nairobi’s economic autonomy and growing tax revenues steadily reduced the significance of British aid contributions, allowing State House greater clout in shaping the bilateral agenda.²¹⁷

Although disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic offered a pretext for the latest cuts, most interviewees felt their scale – approximately 46% over two years²¹⁸ – inevitably undermined the UK’s agency and reputation.²¹⁹ The execution was cast as ‘ruthless’ and ‘unstrategic’, with policymakers in London neglecting context specificity and distorting local budgets.²²⁰ The possibility of further

216. For example, education spending.

217. Growth averaged 4.79% per year from 2010 to 2021. See World Bank, ‘GDP Growth (Annual %) – Kenya’, <<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?end=2021&locations=KE&start=1961&view=chart>>, accessed 21 February 2023.

218. Based on data in FCDO, ‘Statistics on International Development: Final UK Aid Spend 2021’, November 2022, p. 74, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1119765/Statistics-on-International-Development-Final-UK-Aid-Spend-2021.pdf>, accessed 7 February 2023.

219. There were exceptions, with some respondents dismissing the 0.7% GNI spending target as an end in itself that hindered innovation and creativity, and others believing it made little difference given Kenya’s self-sufficiency. Similar findings were also documented in Coalition for Global Prosperity, ‘Outcompeting Strategic Challengers: The Case of China in Africa’, March 2023.

220. For instance, education spending – a ministerial priority – was preserved and arguably ‘overfunded’, while resourcing for relief and healthcare was slashed.

drops in ODA spending by mid-2023 also risked detracting from long-term planning and the ability to cover the upfront costs involved in selling (sensitive) structural reforms to a Kenyan audience.²²¹ CSOs (often dependent on foreign funding) expressed similar concerns amid a decline in civic mobilisation and bottom-up engagement, ingredients essential to the efficacy of external projects.

Surprisingly, there was limited criticism from Kenyans more broadly,²²² due in part to other donors trimming their inputs and few meeting the 0.7% threshold. Nevertheless, British aid and foreign investment were widely seen as ‘stuck’, with many predicting knock-on effects given the commercialised dynamics framing bilateral relations. With less ‘on the table’ for the Ruto administration, the value and resilience of this ‘special’ partnership was called into question, as one respondent noted: cuts ‘put [UK agency] further down the pecking order’, not least because soft-power engagement was often dismissed as ‘irrelevant’ by local elites. Others flagged potential regression across key policy and programmatic areas. Despite the importance of consolidating democratic gains over consecutive ballot cycles, for instance, practitioners faced pressure to slash funding for electoral support – a demand that not only overlooked why UK contributions found traction in 2022, but ignored evident signs of backsliding only months after the Supreme Court upheld President Ruto’s victory (as noted in Chapter II). Without predictability, longevity or financial heft, interviewees explained how any intervention would struggle to sustain momentum or impact, let alone generate lasting cultural change across recipient institutions.

Structures

The historical baseline for UK coordination – not only between development and defence officials, but also within a highly compartmentalised DFID office – was set fairly low by respondents.²²³ Successive iterations of a ‘whole-of-government approach’ made some progress, with the 2015 roll-out of the ‘Fusion Doctrine’ improving day-to-day operations, business planning and collaboration between different departments.²²⁴ The 2017 Kenyan elections also offered clear evidence of joint working between the FCO and DFID, which proved useful when the two eventually merged. Education programming likewise received support

221. Preventing sexual and gender-based violence was referenced as an example, with the Kenyan government having to see the benefits before committing investment.

222. The impact was considered diffuse compared to countries such as Rwanda, where the UK is among the biggest donors.

223. An additional example was the reported disconnect between DFID Kenya and Somalia despite their colocation in the same building and working on common cross-border challenges.

224. This was preceded by the Full Spectrum Approach, Integrated Approach, Comprehensive Approach and, back in 1997, Tony Blair’s ‘joined-up government’ policy. See Watson and Karlshøj-Pedersen, ‘Fusion Doctrine in Five Steps: Lessons Learned from Remote Warfare in Africa’, Oxford Research Group, 2019.

from BHC's governance and security teams, and the National Security Council was seen by some as imposing strategic coherence across the UK's various lines of effort, even if others questioned its consistency. Nevertheless, references to siloes remained common, and a lack of agility, communication and flexibility were blamed for exacerbating gaps in project coverage.

Elsewhere, interviewees acknowledged the difficulties of integrating defence with development and diplomatic efforts. Even in the context of cross-government frameworks such as CSSF, multiple teams still needed to report up their respective management chains before contributing towards mission-level decisions, generating delays and confusion 'when trying to tackle structural challenges ... across UK interventions'. Despite progress, BPST-A – a theoretical showcase for civil-military cooperation – still only features a handful of civilians and police, reducing its ability to reflect the increasingly eclectic realities of contemporary peace-support operations. Additionally, short rotations sapped corporate memory, sensitivities and in-house relationships, raising barriers to collaborative working. That said, participants did track improvement due in part to 'extraordinary engagement' by the High Commissioner, and plans to ramp up the British Defence Staff were considered accelerants for future collaboration. Others recounted anecdotal cases of successful defence-development outcomes, with BATUK helping FCDO's Reinvent programme to strengthen POLICARE and gender-sensitive policing.

With development previously characterised as 'out there doing its own thing', the DFID-FCO merger was also considered a valuable opportunity to reduce duplication and confusion between London-based teams, their local counterparts, and other agencies such as BII. Evident benefits included synthesising Department of International Trade and DFID economic programmes in line with the mutual prosperity pillar of the UK-Kenya Strategic Partnership, and fleshing out the necessary infrastructure to deliver health sector engagements that 'combine [public] health, development and foreign policy work'. The High Commissioner in particular received praise for effectively mobilising political buy-in across different education activities, and drawing on past lessons to supplement technical assistance with diplomatic outreach and cross-embassy coordination during the 2022 elections.

However, the merger's unplanned announcement appeared to slow implementation, compounding the challenges of Covid-19, economic turbulence and aid cuts. At the time of data gathering, there were still discrepancies across administrative systems, software and branding. Interviewees likewise identified operational tensions, and expressed worries about the optics and symbolism of the UK deprioritising Kenyan development in favour of its own diplomatic and security

interests.²²⁵ While these were not universal – a number maintained that development and diplomacy received equal weighting, or that DFID programmes were sometimes placed above those of the FCO, such as in education – several also referenced a ‘brain drain’ of developmental expertise due to the ‘marginalisation’ of former DFID personnel in FCDO decision-making, raising concerns over the UK’s standing as a ‘world leader’ in the field.²²⁶

The coordination picture is further complicated by the increasingly prominent role of financial instruments now packaged under British Investment Partnerships. BII is a key part of this approach, focusing on the promotion of productive, inclusive and sustainable investments that are geared towards generating commercial returns and ensuring ‘value for the British taxpayer’. Despite its long history,²²⁷ respondents described a fundamental lack of understanding across the FCO, DFID and later the FCDO over the organisation’s role and remit – an issue only temporarily resolved by the appointment of senior officials familiar with BII’s operating model. Additionally, the discrete mechanics, priorities and interests of these different structures may not always be mutually reinforcing. For instance, various FCDO teams are keen to provide targeted economic assistance at the county level across Kenya, but BII could not necessarily cater for these specific needs given its mandatory focus on large-scale projects – a goal requiring partners with strong extant capacities that (potentially) bias coverage towards already developed areas.²²⁸

Relationships

Clearly, Kenya’s commercial, security, diplomatic and development spheres still have significant ties to the UK, grounded on shared interests, history, cultural familiarity and language. Much of the elite receive some form of British education, subscribe to British media, benefit from the UK’s corporate footprint and work alongside the British diaspora. As a result, interviewees felt this multi-layered affiliation remained resilient, despite the complex legacies of colonialism and changes wrought by electoral violence and ICC controversies. While ‘closed door chastisement’ may occur during policy dialogue, the UK was also considered

225. It should be noted that several Kenyan stakeholders felt this was already the case before the merger.

226. Some respondents likewise argued that the contextual understanding, agility and quality of formerly DFID-led business cases had declined.

227. The BII has held various monikers, starting out as the Colonial Development Corporation (1948) before being relabelled as the Commonwealth Development Corporation (1963) and latterly British Investment International (2021).

228. The rebranding of the UK’s ‘development investment arm’ was also criticised for ‘chasing colonial post-Brexit fantasies’ at the expense of ‘development goals and poverty reduction’. See Lizzy Davies, ‘UK Accused of Abandoning World’s Poor as Aid Turned into Colonial Investment’, *The Guardian*, 21 December 2021.

‘less abrasive’ than in the past, with research participants referencing attempts to develop a partnership based on mutual respect, understanding and alignment.

Some respondents believed that this softer approach is paying off: access and information exchanges are routine, even at higher levels; diplomatic and defence cooperation persist;²²⁹ and ministerial visits usually enable the UK to unblock obstacles – for example, around investment initiatives. However, maintenance of close inter-governmental relations has arguably prompted a reduction in the support available for Kenyan civil society and non-state actors,²³⁰ with security, trade and ‘mutual prosperity’ displacing a focus on governance, human rights and accountability.

Another shift has been the sharp drop-off in UK financial inputs, which could erode the durability of a ‘special’ UK–Kenya relationship. Although an upcoming generation of politicians still see benefit in collaboration, Britain’s post-independence standing as a guarantor of Kenyan stability and its strong cultural influence have declined significantly since the 1970s. Complacency over some indelible bond may therefore prove misplaced: many Kenyans (quite reasonably) view the UK less with trust than ‘wary familiarity’, and interviewees regularly criticised Whitehall for failing to understand Nairobi’s decision-making, such as its threatened closure of the Dadaab refugee camp complex, non-extradition of corruption suspects and politics around Covid-19. Those in country clearly appreciate the need for tact and humility,²³¹ emphasising the importance of relationship-building and avoiding paternalistic proclivities. Nevertheless, personal connections are not always in place when most needed; staff turnover can make reliance on individual networks hard to sustain; and, however sensitively delivered, the basic premise of Western strategy is often seen as tutelary.

From a Kenyan perspective, partners can find the UK’s bureaucracy and conditionalities cumbersome. Engagement has also been complicated by inevitable perceptions of neo-colonialism, controversies tied to BATUK and the British Army,²³² and London’s apparent failure to back Kenya in its maritime dispute with Somalia. Any overt support for UK positioning is therefore seen as risky, especially as local demagogues can mobilise anti-colonial sentiment with ease, leaving ‘many within the [Kenyan] system...keen to collaborate without being seen to do so publicly’.

229. Often aided by the seniority and competence of top UK diplomats in Kenya.

230. To clarify, this is not a complete withdrawal: the UK still supports CSOs working on election monitoring, CVE, sexual and gender-based violence, accountability in devolution, and so on.

231. Not only within BHC, but also BPST-A trainers teaching Kenyan soldiers who have conducted multiple tours in Somalia.

232. See, for example, Peter Muiruri, ‘She Did Not Deserve to Die Like This: Family of Agnes Wanjiru Seek Justice’, *The Guardian*, 9 November 2021.

Nairobi also enjoys leverage from its role in counterterrorism and regional stability, and its increasing freedom to choose between partners (or ‘play them off against one another’). In this context, Whitehall continues to value Kenya but finds its own relevance depreciating, with the relationship now described as increasingly equitable and transactional. As a corollary, the terms of engagement are more competitive, arguably pitting the UK against bigger players like China. The latter’s supply chains, corporate coverage and small-scale entrepreneurialism inevitably dwarf UK business influence, not least because its economic model allegedly ‘create[s] room for grand corruption’.²³³ Even if concerns over waste, inefficiency and fallout from debt-trap diplomacy have mounted in Nairobi and Beijing, the visibility of Chinese construction projects arguably retains public appeal and enables elites to exploit their delivery for electoral campaigning. Though the UK also provides commercial investment, green financing and developmental resourcing via initiatives like TradeMark East Africa, much of the focus has been on technical inputs and social infrastructure, leaving it difficult to identify clear, transformative impacts on Kenyan productivity. Officials may hope the quality of UK services shines through over time, but they are unlikely to out-compete the immediate material benefits offered by Beijing. While the two approaches can ‘cordially’ coexist, Global Britain’s emphasis on a commoditised relationship with Kenya was therefore seen as possibly accentuating tensions with other international parties in ways deleterious to local British engagement and bargaining power.

That said, these dynamics should not be overstated. As Samuel Makinda notes, the UK and the US retain comparatively high ‘structural power’²³⁴ in Nairobi after shaping significant portions of the ‘political system, legal infrastructure and education system’.²³⁵ At the same time, patterns of Chinese investment have not bolstered local industry so much as facilitated Beijing’s entry into the East African market, positioning China as a growing economic competitor in the region and ‘indirectly empower[ing] Kenya’s neighbours at Kenya’s expense’.²³⁶ Consequently, Makinda concludes that ‘just as China’s presence in Kenya is viewed as a challenge to Kenya’s relations in the West, [its] increased presence in eastern Africa is potentially a challenge to Kenya’s economic dominance in the East Africa Community’.²³⁷

For their part, Western missions were generally believed to share the UK’s broader aims: Whitehall aligns closely with the US, and the BHC is active across donor

233. As one interviewee explained, China offers ‘a cake that can be shared down the patronage system’.

234. Defined as ‘the power to determine or shape frameworks and structures within which states and other actors operate’. See Samuel Makinda, ‘The Rise of China in Kenya’s Foreign Relations’, in Cheeseman, Kanyinga and Lynch (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Kenyan Politics*, p. 610.

235. Makinda, ‘The Rise of China in Kenya’s Foreign Relations’.

236. *Ibid.*

237. *Ibid.*, p. 613.

groups and coordination clusters, including those focused on education, climate, electoral assistance and security.²³⁸ However, complementarity between different workstreams can sometimes be limited in practice, creating difficulties when trying to push common agendas or tackle cross-cutting issues such as P/CVE through collaborative programming.

In this context, Brexit was dismissed by several interviewees as having little impact in Kenya: the UK has always enjoyed a distinct voice in country, and Kenyans perceive little change since the UK left the EU. Others felt that it had nevertheless become harder to influence EU political and development engagement, a pattern compounded by cuts in British aid funding despite informal workarounds. More importantly, Brexit was also seen as depriving the UK of valuable strategic cover 'leading from the back', particularly in relation to sensitive areas of policy dialogue. Broaching any criticism over electoral violence, human rights abuses and KDF operations in southern Somalia, for instance, was considered easier and more effective when 'running as a pack with EU friends' than pushing these issues unilaterally as the former colonial power.

238. For instance, interviewees viewed the UK's role as a 'transatlantic bridge' helping align donor programming and communication during the 2017 elections.

Conclusion

Nairobi has long been an enduring fixture in UK foreign policy; a relationship grounded on shared history, language, economics and security needs. Kenya remains a vital commercial hub, benefits from the greatest number of British ‘aid-for-trade’ programmes in sub-Saharan Africa,²³⁹ and is one of the few countries name-checked in both the Integrated Review and International Development Strategy. Recently formalised by the Strategic Partnership (2020–25), bilateral interests span ‘mutual prosperity’, stability, sustainable development, global leadership on climate and environmental issues, and ‘productive alliances’ at an individual and institutional level. Likewise, Kenya occupies a crucial role in UK military thinking, with the Defence Command Paper outlining the possibility of an ‘enhanced presence’, and value of long-running cooperation.²⁴⁰

Clearly, UK engagement has delivered significant results, not least improvements in Kenya’s social infrastructure, public services and humanitarian outcomes. Adept programming, contextual knowledge and networking via the BHC have enabled successful collaboration with other donors and contributed towards – or driven – numerous examples of positive change, from educational reforms to electoral monitoring.

But the realities of this longstanding relationship are complex, with historical ties offering both benefit and burden. Despite close alignment, political and cultural familiarity should not be conflated with trust, influence or diplomatic capital. Fallout from electoral violence in 2013, and subsequent ICC charges, exposed how quickly claims of neo-colonialism can be instrumentalised against British involvement. Concurrently, Kenya’s economic independence, burgeoning donor landscape and role in countering Al-Shabaab have weakened the broader resonance of Western conditionalities. Beneath tropes of democratisation and ‘open societies’, UK interventions on governance issues seem more measured, with a commensurate shift in focus from CSOs to State House. While not universal – the BHC continues to work alongside and fund civic groups, and support peacebuilding, electoral accountability and police reform – much of the coverage is increasingly technical and incremental, in part to avoid infringing on elite interests.

Against this backdrop, Brexit did not necessarily impact day-to-day operations. The UK’s development expertise, longstanding relationships, economic weight and strategic investments continue to underpin multilateral collaboration with

239. See ICAI, ‘Approach Paper: UK Aid for Trade’.

240. MoD, *Defence in a Competitive Age*, CP 411 (London: The Stationery Office, 2021).

international donors. But the transition has deprived UK officials of valuable strategic cover on areas of policy dialogue that would be sensitive to push unilaterally as the former colonial power. Diminishing aid budgets, the DFID–FCO merger, and Kenya’s own bargaining power also speak to a wider shift in the logic and terms of bilateral engagement. ‘Global Britain’ discourse may emphasise the centrality of trade and investment, but there is a risk that this transactional relationship could precipitate direct competition with larger players such as China and the US. At the same time, a lack of resourcing appears to be undermining the feasibility of long-term reforms, particularly if practitioners working on electoral support, for instance, cannot follow up or consolidate inherently protracted cultural, normative and structural changes. While specific focus areas like education appear insulated from recent funding cuts, key elements of the ‘Global Britain’ agenda have become increasingly difficult to deliver, creating confusion over the hierarchy of UK priorities. Without clarity, the UK’s role as a major economic and political voice in Kenya, and its wider role as a developmental heavyweight, may therefore be called into question.

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