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Briefing Paper

New Development Divisions - major aid initiative

Monday's little publicised announcement (Hansard Nov 8th) that three new Development Divisions are being set up marks an important advance in the evolution of British aid.

Development Divisions are formally regional offices of ODA and are financed on the ODA Vote. They are staffed by small groups of development specialists whose main duties are:

- 1) to provide consultancy services and technical assistance to governments that require it;
- 2) to advise British diplomatic missions on the scope, make-up and use of the aid programme to the countries in their regions.

Currently, there are two such Divisions, one in Beirut, serving the Middle East, and the other in Barbados, serving the Commonwealth Caribbean. The latter also administers aid directly in the Associated States and remaining dependencies, with delegated authority to approve capital aid projects costing not more than £250,000. The existing Divisions are to be joined by new ones for East Africa (covering Zambia, Kenya, Uganda, Mauritius, Seychelles and possibly later also Tanzania); Southern Africa (Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland and Malawi); and South-East Asia (covering most probably Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Philippines, Thailand, Burma, and some of the Commonwealth Pacific Islands). When fully operational, the five Divisions will cover some 50 countries or territories, which between them accounted for about 45% (£90m) of British bilateral aid in 1970.

The Select Committee on Overseas Aid, noting the authority delegated to the Caribbean Division, recommended that there should be a degree of delegation to all British missions which can call on the type of expertise provided by Development Divisions. The way is now open for putting this recommendation into effect in a large number of countries, and it is likely that in future British missions served by Development Divisions will be able to approve projects up to £250,000 on their own responsibility.

Importance of the change

Up to now the British aid programme has been administered largely from London, through diplomatic missions, backed up by visits from UK based specialists. Only a handful of ODA staff (with the exception of those serving in the two Development Divisions) were posted overseas. There were four main disadvantages in this system.

First, because diplomatic missions did not have the required expertise to deal with the many problems that arise in the course of the planning and implementation of country aid programmes, serious delays were inevitable.

Second, decisions were taken without the up-to-date and first-hand knowledge of recipient problems that can be gained by residence in the area; short-term visits, while useful, were not a sufficient substitute.

* Britain has made no new aid commitments to Tanzania since 1968

Third, the identification of useful areas for assistance, and the preparation, appraisal, and implementation of projects often require labyrinthine efforts which many recipients find difficult to undertake. Lack of expert personnel on the spot has hitherto limited Britain's positive contribution in this area. This has been a particular disadvantage in countries with the weakest local administrations as well as in the more difficult sectors, such as agriculture and rural development, both of which have been recognised in principle as priority areas for British aid.

Fourth, it has been found that the effectiveness of individual experts provided under technical assistance programmes has often suffered through imprecise terms of reference, lack of continuity and inadequate back-up services; much of this can be attributed to the absence of appropriate field representation.

The setting up of more Development Divisions, and the devolution of decision-taking from London which is likely to follow, can minimise these problems, thereby ensuring improved efficiency and subtler response to the special development needs of particular recipient countries.