

Royal College of Nursing Briefing on the House of Lords debate on the impact of conflict, extreme poverty and climate-related emergencies globally; and of the progress towards achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals

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The Royal College of Nursing (RCN) is the largest professional body and trade union for nursing staff in the world. We represent around half a million members who are registered nurses, midwives, students, and nursing support workers across the United Kingdom and beyond.

1. Background

- 1.1. The UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3 – Good Health – aims to achieve universal health coverage; improve maternal, neonatal and child mortality; end the HIV/AIDS epidemic; and expand access to lifesaving vaccines by 2030 – but global progress is off track to meet these targets. Around 4.5 million people do not have access to essential health services and the COVID-19 pandemic is estimated to have set back global progress on life expectancy by a decade.¹
- 1.2. Cuts to the UK's aid spending have serious consequences for the health of people in some of the poorest parts of the world, many of whom are also facing the impacts of climate change and conflict. The International Development Committee's report into the impact of cuts to UK aid warned of the impact on those furthest behind including women, girls and people with disabilities, noting that FCDO's own assessment highlighted the risk that thousands more women would face unsafe abortions, and thousands would die in pregnancy and childbirth.²

2. Conflict and health care delivery

- 2.1. By 2030, 2.3 billion people will live in fragile and conflict affected states. Conflicts not only continue to cause immense suffering but also disrupt progress towards the SDGs. The destruction of health infrastructure, as well as water and sanitation systems, has a catastrophic impact on the delivery of care and attainment of SDG 3, Good Health.
- 2.2. In conflict zones vaccine-preventable diseases such as polio have re-emerged posing a significant threat to populations of children. Gaza is one example where the first case of polio was confirmed in August 2024. Prior to the war, Palestine had been polio-free for 25 years³.
- 2.3. The RCN is deeply troubled by the high number of reports of attacks on health workers and health systems. In 2023 alone the WHO verified 1,526 attacks on health systems across 19 countries and territories. These attacks resulted in 755 deaths and 1,262 injuries of both patients and health workers.⁴ This represents a three-fold increase in the number of deaths since 2022.

2.4. Nurses and their colleagues must be able to work without the threat of violence or obstructions to their delivery of care. It is vital that the protections of health personnel and health systems under the Geneva Conventions are enforced.

3. UK contributions via Official Development Assistance spending

3.1. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that the world will face a shortage of 4.5 million nurses by 2030.⁵ Nurses are the backbone of every health system, constituting around half of the world's health workforce. The SDGs, and especially those goals relating to universal health coverage (UHC), cannot be achieved without substantial increases in funding for the development and expansion of the global health workforce.

3.2. The United Nations (UN) has established a target for countries to spend 0.7% of their Gross National Income (GNI) on Official Development Assistance (ODA), such funds are vital to the attainment of the SDGs. However, in 2020, citing the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the UK Government announced a temporary reduction in ODA to 0.5% of GNI to be implemented in February 2021.

3.3. In subsequent years, ODA spending on health-related projects has declined. The figures for UK ODA in 2023 published last month reveal that spending on health is now half of what it was in 2020, the lowest spending levels since 2014. Spending on education, water and sanitation fell to their lowest since 2009.⁶

3.4. The new Labour Government has confirmed a commitment to restore ODA spending to 0.7% of GNI "as soon as fiscal circumstances allow".⁷ Such funds are critical to make vital improvements needed to address the global health challenges of today.

4. Suggested questions to ask the Minister

- 4.1. What assessment has the government undertaken on the impact of the reduction of the UK's spending on official development assistance on access to healthcare globally?
- 4.2. What discussions have Ministers had with international counterparts on the global nursing shortage and what action is the government taking to address this?
- 4.3. What assessment have Ministers undertaken on the impact of the shortage of the global nursing workforce on the ability to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals?

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¹ [The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2024 \(un.org\)](#)

² [International Development Committee reveals real world impact of cuts to UK aid - Committees - UK Parliament](#)

³ [Gaza: Israeli Aid Obstruction Inflaming Polio Outbreak | Human Rights Watch \(hrw.org\)](#)

⁴ [SSA Home | Index \(who.int\)](#) 1 Jan 2023 – 31 December 2023

⁵ [Nursing and midwifery \(who.int\)](#)

⁶ [Final UK ODA statistics for 2023 – The legacy of recent cuts and what is at stake in the budget | Bond](#)

⁷ [0.7 per cent of GNI on ODA target 2023 - Statement made on 29 July 2024 - Written statements - Written questions, answers and statements - UK Parliament](#)