

# The EU and the fight against global poverty – some reflections from Christian Aid

---

The forthcoming referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union is an important opportunity for us all to reflect on the role, purpose and future of the European Union and the UK's role within it, as well the kind of world we want to see more broadly. It is also a moment for all of us to engage in the public debate and to exercise wisely our right to vote. Christian Aid has been reflecting particularly on how the decision we make in the UK may or may not impact people living in poverty around the world, and on our goal of ending poverty.

It is worth remembering that, whatever the future holds, the European Union has had a role in preserving the peace and stability of the continent. Because Christian Aid was founded in 1945 as a response from the churches to suffering and poverty in Europe caused by the Second World War, our roots and history are closely linked to the broader project for ensuring peace and shared prosperity in Europe and we would want to affirm the legacy of relative security that the European Union and its precursors have helped to ensure over the last 70 years.

While peace and security within the EU and the UK are important to maintain, the EU and the UK also have a crucial global role to play in working for a world that provides peace and an end to poverty for all. The current debate gives us an opportunity to reflect on what this role might look like in the future, and whether it would be more effective for the UK and EU to play this role separately or together.

People of faith will be found on both sides of the debate. However, Christian Aid is concerned that the public debate so far has focused around narrow concepts of economic self-interest, neglecting concepts such as peace, solidarity, democracy, sovereignty, identity and empowerment, which are all important dimensions to the debate and to our shared future on this planet. We also feel that the debate around migration has been,

at times, dehumanising and we would want to assert the inherent worth of men, women and children of all nationalities, and the biblical mandate to love our neighbour sacrificially. We want above all to encourage our friends and supporters to think about this vote in the light of the basic commitments we share to justice for all in the name of God's Kingdom.

Overall, the debate so far has paid scant attention to the potential impacts of the decision on people living in poverty worldwide, which feels remiss given that some impact is inevitable. Our supporters and sponsoring churches have encouraged us to share our reflections on the particular questions it would be good to probe with the different campaigns during the referendum debate.

The debate is complex. There are huge unknowns around the UK's new relationship with the EU if there were a decision to leave, and we can only speculate about the policies that the UK Government might pursue following either referendum outcome. We do not attempt to offer a definitive answer as to whether it is better in the fight against global poverty for the UK to remain inside or to leave the EU. The repercussions of a UK exit from the EU will have wide-ranging impacts on economic and foreign policy, trade and financial matters, as well as on the UK constitution. It is impossible to predict just how these may affect developing countries, and global relations more widely. What we can offer is some reflection on immediate ways in which the vote might affect our work to tackle poverty.

As you prepare to vote, we encourage you to think about these questions and how a vote to remain in or to leave the EU might make a difference to the world's most vulnerable people. Whatever the outcome, Christian Aid will continue to work with our supporters and partners to try to improve the decisions of our own government, the EU and others so they benefit the poorest and most vulnerable around the world.

---

## **Q1. If the UK were to leave the EU, how will the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable be protected?**

During any time of upheaval it is usually the poorest who are worst affected. If the UK opts to leave the EU, the UK will enter a period of political, financial, constitutional and legal uncertainty as laws and treaties are changed. No-one knows how long this would take or what the ultimate repercussions would be. These changes could present both opportunities and risks to the fight against poverty. Many of the policies and processes that Christian Aid has influenced over recent years to protect the poorest have involved the EU. For example, it was as part of the EU bloc that the UK negotiated in the UN climate change talks which achieved a successful global deal in Paris last year. Likewise EU policies partially shape the UK's own approaches to energy, aid, humanitarian and tax policies and financial regulations.

If the UK decides to leave the EU, these policies and mechanisms will need to be renegotiated by the UK. They may be strengthened or weakened in their positive impact on global poverty. We need to ask:

- How will those living in poverty be protected in these renegotiations?
- Will leaders commit to ensuring that effective aid to developing countries is maintained, that the impact of new policies on the most vulnerable is taken into account and prioritised, and that the strongest of the EU's current commitments to human rights, tackling climate change and poverty eradication are retained?

## **Q2. How will the UK continue to coordinate its international development (and other relevant policies) with other EU nations and other international governments?**

Nations are only able to tackle global problems – from humanitarian crises to climate change, corruption and tax avoidance – in cooperation with other nations. No country can deal with them on its own. Of course the EU is only one grouping for cooperation, and there are other relevant ones such as the UN and the OECD. However, for the UK the EU is currently a major partner on many

issues of concern to developing countries and vulnerable people. What is more, it is easier in management terms for recipient countries and more efficient for the donor when aid is delivered by multilateral rather than bilateral arrangements. Of the total UK aid, 11% currently goes through EU mechanisms to support developing countries. (Indeed, Christian Aid has direct experience of this, having been awarded EU aid funding, partly funded by the UK, for many projects over many years.)

### **We need to ask:**

- If the UK were to leave the EU, what other international groupings might it join in order to continue to respond with the same level of effectiveness to some of these global challenges? Would these be likely to have more or less helpful outcomes for the world's poor?

## **Q3. How will the UK Government continue to be a world leader on international development?**

The UK has often played a global leadership role on issues that are important to international development and has used its role within the EU to encourage other nations to follow suit. The UK has been an influential member of the EU. It is the third biggest member state after Germany and France and can therefore have a significant impact on the results of EU votes. It is also one of the top three donors to EU aid, so can also have considerable influence over EU aid strategies.

One example of a positive effect of the UK's influence is the EU's vote to re-affirm its commitment to the 0.7% aid target. Without the UK's strong influence it is very possible that the vote would have gone the other way and the EU's 0.7% commitment would have disappeared. There are also recent examples of the UK using EU meetings to get other member states to increase financial support to humanitarian efforts in Syria and to the Ebola response. The UK also played a positive role in defining the position of the EU in the run-up to the Paris Climate Summit in 2015.

The UK's role has not always been so constructive. For example, it has also supported legislation on conflict-

---

related minerals that was weaker than the OECD guidelines (which could themselves have been stronger). So it is true that poor communities might, in relation to some laws and policies, be better off overall if the UK was not part of the EU, although in that case the UK in turn would not be subject to some of the more helpful EU laws that have benefited those same communities.

**We need to ask:**

- What plans does the UK government have to consolidate international support for its development priorities if it leaves the EU? Which other international influencing opportunities would be a priority for the UK Government?

**Q4. The EU (and the UK within it) has not always played the most helpful role possible in the fight against global poverty. In current discussions around EU reform some of the most pertinent issues were not addressed. If the UK stays in the EU, how could further reform help people living in poverty?**

Christian Aid has long identified ways in which existing EU policies and practices need to be improved in favour of poor communities. The EU has accepted that all its external policies should at the very least not undermine its commitment to development and poverty reduction, but in practice that often seems to get forgotten. For example, the outcome of the recent Valletta summit between the EU and a number of African states, convened to address the issue of migration from Africa into the EU, was very disappointing and set a trajectory for using overseas development aid not to lift people out of poverty so much as to improve African countries'

border controls. Recent reforms have failed to address the many ways in which the Common Agricultural Policy as currently implemented has negative results for environment and climate, and harms developing countries by encouraging the dumping of surplus produce there, undercutting local producers.

**We need to ask:**

- If the UK stays in the EU, will we push it to improve the effect of its policies on developing countries?
- If the UK leaves the EU, how might it be able to encourage that improvement even from outside?

We do not think that there is only one defensible position for Christian Aid supporters in the coming referendum. But we do strongly believe that the discussion needs to be brought back repeatedly to the question of how in the event of either outcome, leaving or staying, we can best encourage our government and other governments to hold firm to their commitments to global justice and to take them still further. The very worst outcome would be one in which people attempted to decide on the basis of considerations that have no place for the vision of universal equity, the unleashing of power for the powerless and the dignity of all men and women, which is the vision that has animated the work of Christian Aid for seven decades.