

EVEN SUPPORTERS SHOULD ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT SCOTLAND'S OVERSEAS AID

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RECENTLY I drew attention to a [report](#) on the Scottish Government's international development fund, which claimed we don't know enough about what is actually being achieved using this £10 million budget.

The International Development Fund has many achievements, the press office assured me in response to the report from the Springfield Centre think-tank.

A Scottish Government spokeswoman cited the training of more medical graduates in Malawi, up from 16 to over 100 every year, and more than 10,000 women given access to cervical screening. Meanwhile a women's scholarship has helped more than 400 young Pakistani women go to university.

But I had asked for evidence – which the centre's report claims is lacking – that actual lasting improvements were being achieved via the fund. I was told clear and stringent measures are in place to monitor such impact. But I wasn't sent these measures.

The Scottish Government says it was not consulted on the 2016 report and was not asked to contribute towards its findings. All the more reason, you might think to heed them.

Our leader last week described the think-tank as "ideologically wedded to market-based solutions". The Springfield Centre's director Ben Taylor disputes this, but says the private sector's role in socio-economic development is often overlooked. The centre is equally critical of private sector involvement, where it fails, according to Mr Taylor.

I was cautious of the provenance of the report, because it seemed odd that a think-tank in Durham should have produced such a comprehensive piece of work on Scotland, unprompted, and wondered if there was a political motive. I think now that I was too wary. The report is vital reading for anyone interested in Scotland's overseas aid programme.

How many Scots, for example, are aware that for all the self-congratulation about our links with Malawi, UK government aid to Malawi is at least 25 times as much as that spent by the Scottish Government?

The report praises the way Scots have embraced the Scotland Malawi Partnership, as a "rare level of civic engagement". But it says accounts of what it achieves are "anecdotal and subjective".

How many Scots know that the flagship Malawi Renewable Energy Acceleration Programme, admits itself that "two thirds of projects are very likely to fail within three years without further support"? Pushing renewable energy on Malawi because the Scottish Government sees community energy in

Scotland as a success story is described in the report as an “aid giver’s agenda” rather than a true response to Malawi’s needs.

All of this seems to me to require a better response than blithe reassurances over health screenings and training. The Scottish Government’s own view is that good development achieves lasting outcomes, “allowing external aid, as a temporary input, to exit” in the report’s words.

When the report was sent round, Mr Taylor says, many in the sector were privately cautious while admitting “that needed saying”. The Scottish Government gave it “no formal acknowledgement whatsoever”, he claims. But it seems to me the report asks important questions and we shouldn’t ignore them just because questioning overseas aid can make you seem churlish.