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Beyond toolkits and 'mutual benefit': Rethinking economic partnerships with the Global South

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Economic partnership initiatives such as the EU's Global Gateway initiative promise a different kind of relationship with the Global South at a time of geopolitical rupture. This paper argues that delivering on that promise will require more than combining existing instruments and creating new aid narratives. Instead, governments need to establish where their long-term economic interests align, negotiate trade-offs and rethink how they work together in practice. Improving coordination is not enough when institutions have different mandates, incentives and assumptions about economic change. A genuine and transformative partnership starts with the economic future we collectively want to achieve and aligns delivery behind that. The paper draws on the UK's approach and discusses four potential building blocks: developing concrete, long-term objectives; designing portfolios of complementary interventions; orchestrating specialised institutions; and using intelligence and learning to adapt delivery dynamically. These provide a starting point for a discussion about rethinking economic partnerships with the Global South that is grounded in practitioner experience and institutional realities.

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Acronyms

AfDB	African Development Bank
AGII	Africa Green Industrialisation Initiative
AI	Artificial Intelligence
BII	British International Investment
BIP	British Investment Partnerships
BIST	Department for Business, Innovation, Science and Trade
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
DBT	Department for Business and Trade
DFI(s)	Development Finance Institution(s)
DFID	Department for International Development
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office
G7	Group of Seven
GCIEP	Green Cities, Infrastructure and Energy Programme
GIP(s)	Growth and Investment Partnership(s)
GIP+	Growth and Investment Partnership Plus
IDC	International Development Committee
JETPs	Just Energy Transition Partnerships
MOBILIST	Mobilising Institutional Capital Through Listed Products
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
ODA	Official Development Assistance
PGII	Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment
PIDG	Private Infrastructure Development Group

R&D	Research and Development
SEGPs	Strategic Economic Growth Plans
TA	Technical Assistance
TEA	Transforming Energy Access
UKEF	UK Export Finance
UK	United Kingdom
UK PACT	UK Partnering for Accelerated Climate Transitions
UKRI	UK Research and Innovation
UN	United Nations

Executive summary

Economic partnership initiatives such as the EU's Global Gateway initiative promise a different kind of relationship with the Global South at a time of geopolitical rupture. Western governments are seeking to connect development cooperation with competitiveness, economic security and geostrategic interests, while countries in the Global South have greater scope to pursue their own economic strategies. Delivering on these ambitions requires more than combining existing instruments into coherent 'toolkits' or framing aid as delivering 'mutual benefit'.

Governments need concrete, long-term economic objectives developed with partners, reflecting where their strategies and interests intersect, negotiating trade-offs and asking how cooperation today can shape future markets and productive capabilities. Individual deals must be aligned to avoid entrenching dependencies or limiting value addition long-term. Objectives must provide direction without fixing the path in advance: priorities and interventions need to adapt as new opportunities and constraints emerge.

This requires working through institutions whose mandates, incentives and assumptions about economic change were shaped in a different era. Export credit agencies, development finance institutions (DFIs) and specialist programmes bring valuable capabilities, but coordination alone may leave their underlying ways of working intact. Drawing on publicly available sources, the paper examines this challenge through the UK's evolution from British Investment Partnerships towards Growth and Investment Partnerships.

The paper examines four aspects of an emerging operating model: setting direction involves translating broad ambitions into country-level priorities developed with partner governments, while giving overseas teams scope to respond to local conditions. Building portfolios involves connecting financial and non-financial interventions around shared objectives, identifying gaps and testing different combinations. Orchestrating capabilities requires teams able to mobilise and align specialised institutions, often without formal control. Building organisational intelligence means bringing together programme evidence, market knowledge and experience from delivery to test assumptions and inform decisions about priorities, commissioning and resources.

The UK experience offers a starting point for examining how similar initiatives can translate new ambitions into practice. The questions it raises extend beyond

institutional effectiveness to the economic objectives partnerships pursue, whose interests shape them and who ultimately benefits.

1. Introduction

Since 2021, Western governments have launched several initiatives to reset economic relationships with the Global South: Global Gateway in the EU, British Investment Partnerships (BIP) in the UK and the Group of Seven (G7) Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII), among others.[1] Widely interpreted as part of a broader Western response to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), they promise a shift from donor-recipient relations towards 'partnerships' with the Global South: bringing government capabilities together into a coherent 'toolkit' to deliver 'mutual benefits' (Szczepański, 2023; Savoy and McKeown, 2022; FCDO, 2023a). They often seek to 'mobilise' private finance towards achieving those aims (Bilal and Klasen, 2025).

Several years later, it is difficult to say what has changed in practice (IDC, 2023; OECD, 2025; European Parliament, 2026; Bilal, 2026). Possible reasons put forward are fragmented instruments, weak deal pipelines, unclear strategic priorities, governance issues and difficulties translating claims of mutual benefit into aligned interests (IDC, 2023; Bilal and Klasen, 2025; OECD, 2025; Bilal, 2026; Heidland, Schularick and Thiele, 2026).

This paper examines the gap between these ambitions and delivery by looking more closely at the bureaucracy behind economic partnerships. Drawing on the UK experience, it argues that modernising economic partnerships with the Global South requires more than 'toolkits': governments need to develop concrete, long-term economic objectives with partner countries, then work backwards to determine how different interventions can reinforce one another, how specialised institutions can work together and how evidence from delivery can inform decisions and adaptation.

2. Economic partnerships in a changing world

For much of the post-Cold War period, Western governments assumed their economic position and influence were secure. Globalisation was expected to spread markets and prosperity, while development policy focused on poverty reduction and correcting market failures. These assumptions are increasingly contested. The global financial crisis exposed the risks of a financialised

[1] Other similar initiatives with a narrower regional or sectoral focus were also launched, such as Italy's Mattei Plan for Africa (Hopkin, 2026) and the Just Energy Transition Partnerships (JETPs) first announced at COP26 in Glasgow.

economic model, while the pandemic raised concerns about its resilience. Weak productivity growth, rising inequality and cost-of-living pressures have challenged its credibility at home. The domestic and international dimensions are connected: a model losing credibility at home also carries less authority abroad. At the same time, productive capabilities have shifted towards emerging economies (Sainsbury et al., 2026), and the rise of China has demonstrated a different approach to combining industrial policy, public finance and economic statecraft.

Mark Carney's 2026 Davos speech captured the mood of the time, when he spoke of a "rupture, not a transition" and acknowledged that the previous order was unfair and skewed towards Western interests (Carney, 2026). Western governments have increasingly been responding with interventionist approaches to economic policy, ranging from industrial policy to intervening directly to secure supply chains and strategic interests. This geoeconomic turn is blurring boundaries between economic, foreign and development policy. For the Global South, the changing balance of power in the global political economy has given more weight to longstanding demands for productive investment, better terms of trade and knowledge transfer. Though choices remain constrained by past economic relationships and bargaining power, some emerging economies now have a wider choice of partners and more scope to pursue their own strategies (Alami et al., 2025).[2]

Western governments face these changes amid longstanding fiscal and political pressures on development cooperation. Austerity and competing domestic spending priorities have placed aid budgets under pressure for years, with even sharper cuts in the last year (OECD, 2026). The emphasis on private finance mobilisation has roots in longstanding fiscal constraints: de-risking has offered policymakers a way to pursue development ambitions with limited public resources (Bernards, 2024; Hameiri and Jones, 2025). Yet the return of geopolitical competition is also changing the balance of priorities within Western governments. As Gabor and Braun (2025) show in the context of green industrial policy, geopolitical considerations can shift the balance of influence from fiscally conservative coalitions towards those favouring more direct state intervention.

[2] Recent literature describes this pattern as 'polyalignment': both a condition arising from the dense networks of trade, production, investment and infrastructure accumulated during globalisation, and efforts by states and other actors to maintain and shape relationships with multiple competing partners (DiCarlo et al., 2026).

3. Rethinking the objectives of economic partnerships

Western initiatives increasingly connect development cooperation with competitiveness, economic security and geostrategic interests (Bilal, 2026). The language of 'mutual benefit' makes economic, geopolitical and security returns to donor countries more explicit (Heidland, Schularick and Thiele, 2026).[3] Yet Western interests are often still considered separately from the 'development needs' of Global South countries. Governments on both sides have agency and economic strategies: countries in the Global South seek industrialisation and higher-value production, while Western economic renewal will rely on deeper productive relationships with emerging economies. Meaningful partnership requires identifying where durable alignment is possible, negotiating trade-offs where interests diverge, and considering how strategies and capabilities on both sides might interact, rather than treating mutual benefits as separate returns to be demonstrated after the fact.

Rethinking partnership objectives means asking what economic change is achievable for both sides. For example, industrial strategies are forward-looking, anticipating future competitiveness and resilience. Both sides therefore need to consider where economic trajectories might intersect and what action today could make that possible (Jindal and Sengupta, 2025). Investment can create future markets, and research and development (R&D) cooperation can develop new capabilities. Areas of complementarity differ across countries and sectors and evolve over time. Their decisions shape future possibilities, while engagement reveals where alignment is possible and what capabilities need to be built. Choices that produce an immediate commercial benefit today can also entrench dependencies, expand production without deepening domestic value capture or close off more valuable opportunities. Individual deals therefore need to be assessed against long-term economic objectives, including macroeconomic stability, building productive capabilities and shaping future markets. These objectives need to provide direction for the relationship while remaining open to revision as opportunities, constraints and interests evolve.

4. Rethinking economic partnerships means moving beyond 'toolkits'

Pursuing these objectives requires working through institutions and instruments developed for different purposes. Export credit, development finance, aid, trade promotion, research and diplomacy have distinct mandates and strengths,

[3] Links between development and donor-country interests are not new (DFID, 1997; DFID, 2017), but the more explicit geoeconomic framing of those interests is a recent development (see Hopkin, 2026).

dispersed across government departments and specialised delivery institutions. But working across silos is only part of the challenge: institutions also embody assumptions about how economic change happens. Their mandates, expertise, incentives, risk tolerances and measures of success reflect different views about the roles of states and markets, and what drives growth and investment. This specialisation provides valuable capabilities, yet an instrument can perform well against its own mandate while contributing little to strategic partnership objectives. Bringing existing capabilities together into a more coherent offer or toolkit may improve collaboration without changing the underlying operating logic.

Moving beyond toolkits requires a state capable of connecting strategic economic objectives to the institutions and capabilities needed to pursue them. This involves making choices about where to focus, how different interventions can reinforce one another and how those choices should evolve as opportunities and constraints emerge. One requirement is stronger 'orchestration'.[4] bringing different capabilities together around concrete objectives, sequencing activity and resolving barriers across institutions and actors that no single organisation fully controls. This requires enough shared direction to guide choices without imposing a fixed plan or central control. But orchestration alone cannot resolve mismatches between partnership objectives and the mandates, incentives or instruments of the institutions involved. Experience from pursuing partnerships also needs to inform wider institutional priorities, resource allocation and ways of working.

5. Rethinking how economic partnerships are delivered: The UK experience

The evolution of the UK's approach to economic partnerships with the Global South provides an opportunity to examine these institutional challenges in practice. BIPs brought together a broad set of UK-backed financial instruments and expertise, while the more recent Growth and Investment Partnerships (GIPs) seek to develop more tailored, country-level economic partnerships.[5] Drawing on

[4] Mission-oriented literature uses 'orchestration' to describe a role of government that goes beyond convening or coordination to create direction, connect public and private capabilities, resolve barriers and enable networks of actors to work towards shared goals (Mazzucato et al., 2024). 'Systems investing' literature uses 'capital orchestration' for the strategic alignment of diverse financial and non-financial interventions around system level goals, with an emphasis on strategic portfolios, systems intelligence and shared directionality (TransCap Initiative, 2025; Hofstetter and Paterson, 2026). The term is used here with an emphasis on combining and sequencing different policy, programme and financial instruments around shared economic objectives.

[5] The 2022 International Development Strategy positioned BIP as a means of bringing together UK-backed finance and expertise, with the aim of mobilising up to £8 billion annually by 2025 (FCDO, 2022). The House of Commons International Development Committee (IDC) subsequently criticised its fragmented approach and

publicly available evidence, this section examines attempts to adapt within existing institutions and ways of working. Pursuing more strategic economic partnerships requires translating broad objectives into choices about where to focus and how different interventions fit together. These choices also need to be reconsidered as engagement with partner governments, firms and markets reveals new opportunities, constraints and trade-offs. Objectives therefore need to provide direction without assuming that pathways or successful solutions can be specified in advance (de Graaff, Wanzenböck and Frenken, 2025; Cheang and Pennington, 2026; Fuchs, 2026). This requires what McLaren and Kattel (2025) describe as a capacity for 'navigation': maintaining direction while continually interpreting changing conditions and adapting the portfolio of interventions in response.[6] The following subsections examine four aspects of this operating model: setting direction, building portfolios, orchestrating capabilities and building organisational intelligence.

a) Setting direction: Start with what you want to achieve, not the tools you have

This approach requires direction at a level that is meaningful for individual countries and markets. Broad objectives such as growth, economic security or energy transition say little about what officials should actually do. They need to be translated into priorities that guide choices in a particular economic relationship. The starting point should therefore be the economic change being sought in that relationship, working backwards to identify the capabilities, conditions and interventions that might enable it rather than beginning with the instruments already available (Hofstetter and Paterson, 2026). Working through concrete, place-based challenges can generate practical knowledge that also reshapes wider priorities (Janssen et al., 2026). Country-level priorities have to be worked out with partner governments, drawing on their economic strategies and political context, alongside UK capabilities, interests and the existing relationship. Much of this knowledge sits close to markets, firms and policymakers in country. Direction therefore needs to combine a wider strategic view with enough local agency to identify where opportunities are real and can survive contact with political or commercial realities. Yuen Yuen Ang's idea of 'directed improvisation' is useful

the absence of a focused strategy, delivery plan and measurable targets (IDC, 2023). The more recent emphasis on GIPs connects country partnerships more explicitly to the UK's domestic economic priorities. The 2025 Industrial Strategy proposes new GIPs in Global South markets offering opportunities for UK industries to export, invest and source inputs (UK Government, 2025), while the Trade Strategy frames deeper partnerships around mutual long-term growth, security and stability (DBT, 2025).

[6] There are precedents in development practice: DFID experimented extensively with adaptive programming and politically informed problem-solving, emphasising learning, feedback and adaptation in complex environments (Wild et al., 2017). The argument here extends some of this logic beyond individual programmes to economic partnerships and the wider state capabilities around them.

here: direction from the centre is combined with room for actors closer to the problem to improvise around local conditions and resources (Ang, 2016).[7]

In the UK, this relationship between central direction and country-level agency also requires working across institutions with different mandates. The Department for Business, Innovation, Science and Trade (BIST, formerly Department for Business and Trade [DBT]) leads on trade and investment promotion, while the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) leads diplomatic and development work overseas. The two departments are increasingly expected to work together through the overseas network in support of the Growth Mission (DBT, 2025; Cabinet Office, 2026; FCDO, 2026g). The UK's Strategic Economic Growth Plans (SEGPs) provide one recent attempt to facilitate collaboration. Introduced initially as a means of identifying priority opportunities in significant markets and informing ministerial engagement, they now form part of a wider effort to connect domestic growth priorities with the work of overseas missions (FCDO, 2025a). The 2025-26 FCDO Annual Report describes refreshed, market-focused growth plans as bringing together the UK's most significant overseas economic and development activity, while the Trade Strategy links deeper GIPs to mutual long-term growth, security and stability (FCDO, 2026c; DBT, 2025). GIPs emerging in countries such as Indonesia are starting to illustrate this trajectory, combining policy and regulatory work, project development, strategic investment and technical cooperation around shared sectoral priorities (FCDO, 2025b).

Country teams can identify opportunities and constraints not visible centrally, while the centre holds sector expertise, instruments and policy leadership. Country-level intelligence needs to inform central choices, just as national strategy shapes country priorities.[8] That agency also needs to extend into the portfolio instruments that make up the partnership, so country teams can shape activity to meet partnership priorities.[9] Giving country teams agency does not mean each post starting from scratch. A workable model also needs common

[7] Amery (2025) applies directed improvisation to UK devolution, arguing for central direction alongside local autonomy to experiment and for learning from local variation to feed back into policy.

[8] Janssen et al. (2026) use the idea of 'small world' problems to describe the translation of broad challenges into tractable problems around which actors can generate practical knowledge and action, while stressing that these local solutions also inform the wider policy direction.

[9] This can also be built into programme delivery mechanisms. Transforming Energy Access (TEA) allows Posts to fund and scale tailored country activity through its existing partnerships, while Growth Gateway and GCIEP have developed bilateral 'buy-in' mechanisms through which Posts can commission activity from centrally managed programmes. GCIEP's 2025 review goes further, describing a shift in the programme's 'decision-making centre of gravity' towards country level, supported by financial systems that enabled country teams to make decisions about budgets and resource allocation. Such flexibility still needs to be disciplined by wider partnership priorities: Growth Gateway's experience, for example, exposed practical challenges around Post capacity, resourcing and the management of programme buy-ins (FCDO, 2025f; FCDO, 2025d; FCDO, 2025e).

infrastructure behind it: country profiles, a structured design process, guidance, case studies and regular reviews. These can provide enough consistency for partnerships to be supported and compared without trying to standardise their substance. They also create a way for problems found in delivery to feed back into central guidance and planning. A thematic evaluation of UK Partnering for Accelerated Climate Transitions (UK PACT) found that synergies across the programme portfolio required clear country strategies, empowered country teams and a governance model led by country-level decision-making, while retaining central programme strategy and capability (FCDO, 2024a).

b) Building portfolios: Make the whole greater than the sum of its parts

Adopting a strategic portfolio approach can help connect individual instruments and other interventions around a shared objective. At country level, a partnership may contain portfolios around priority issues identified with the partner country or specific sectors. Governments can also benefit from managing portfolios centrally that bring together all relevant financial and non-financial instruments. These portfolios make it easier to see how activities contribute to the economic trajectory being pursued and where important gaps or contradictions sit between them. Portfolio approaches are effective when they affect commissioning, resource allocation and the deployment of expertise, rather than simply providing a different way of mapping existing activity. At programme level, for example, the UK's Growth Gateway uses a portfolio approach to calibrate the mix between firm-level deal acceleration and longer, multi-phase interventions aimed at investment, policy reform and institutional change, with that mix kept under review as evidence accumulates (FCDO, 2025d). However, most strategic priorities require adopting a portfolio approach beyond the programme level. Economic partnership initiatives like GIP rely on leveraging portfolios, and the UK's 2026 Modern Development Approach also recognises the need to take a more holistic portfolio view of programmes, diplomacy and policy together (FCDO, 2026d).

Constructing such portfolios requires an understanding of the different roles that financial and non-financial interventions can play. A firm or technology with high transformation potential may initially depend on research support, grants or highly risk-tolerant capital before becoming suitable for development finance or commercial capital. A sector may require regulatory reform, infrastructure, skills and market development alongside finance. Many of the financing constraints encountered at transaction level reflect wider economic and institutional conditions. Weak project pipelines, short financing tenors and limited availability of local currency finance may constrain financial flows without representing a

failure of financial intermediation. Public or concessional finance can bridge these constraints in the short term, while changing the underlying structural conditions will require longer-term development of institutions, productive capabilities and domestic markets.
The UK's Manufacturing Africa programme illustrates how specialist technical assistance, market analysis and transaction support can connect reforms and firms to investment. Its annual reviews found that upstream technical assistance was feeding the investment pipeline and helping DFIs to invest. That learning informed the development of a dedicated platform combining technical assistance, deal acceleration and finance to address gaps for smaller manufacturers (FCDO, 2023b; FCDO, 2024b). The relationship can also work in both directions: Technical Assistance (TA) programmes can identify investment opportunities for DFIs, increase the impact of DFI investments in markets and address market constraints exposed through the investment process (van Rhyn, 2024).

Another UK programme, Transforming Energy Access (TEA), offers an illustration of how different forms of support can build on one another over time. Through TEA, FCDO and Shell Foundation provided successive grants to SunCulture to test a pay-as-you-go financing model and later experiment with using carbon revenues to make its solar irrigation products more affordable. These interventions helped demonstrate the viability of different aspects of the business model and were followed by debt and equity investment, including investment from British International Investment (BII) and Private Infrastructure Development Group (PIDG), which are part of the wider UK portfolio (Shell Foundation, 2025; BII, 2023). The example points towards orchestration in which different forms of support can be connected to the same objective and adapted as an opportunity develops. Such connections can also be made an explicit part of programme delivery. The Green Cities, Infrastructure and Energy Programme (GCIEP) logframe, for example, tracks and incentivises collaboration with other parts of the UK portfolio, including BII (FCDO, 2025e).

The value of combining these interventions depends not only on how effectively they complement one another, but also on the economic objectives they serve and how those objectives are negotiated with partner governments. This also requires attention to additionality: whether interventions relieve binding constraints and generate economic activity or capabilities that would not otherwise emerge, rather than merely displacing existing provision. De-risking private capital can be valuable where a lack of patient and risk-bearing capital is preventing investment that advances the strategic objective. However, treating the mobilisation of private capital as an objective in itself can draw attention

away from the wider impact and economic transformation that development finance is intended to support. Many economic and social objectives require public investment, technical expertise or policy change, while financial interventions may depend on publicly funded catalytic activity elsewhere in the portfolio. The recent evaluation of the UK's GIP with Tanzania illustrates this broader perspective: it examines the combined contribution of strategic planning, tax reform, infrastructure, investment promotion and financial leverage across government, rather than attributing outcomes to a single programme or financing channel (FCDO, 2026e).

More broadly, portfolios help governments pursue objectives where the pathway to change cannot be specified in advance. Their value lies partly in making the intended direction of change visible across the system. Rather than starting from an individual programme or financial instrument, a 'speculative portfolio' can bring together financial and non-financial interventions around a shared objective, exploring how they might interact (Conway 2026). This creates a basis for aligning interventions, identifying gaps and testing assumptions about how change might happen. It also allows different approaches to be pursued in parallel, without prematurely converging on a single theory of change. This matters particularly in innovation and start-up ecosystems, where viable technologies, business models and commercial linkages often have to be discovered through decentralised experimentation rather than selected in advance (Cheang and Pennington, 2026). Portfolio construction becomes a form of design: articulating a direction of change and orchestrating interventions around it while retaining room to learn.[10]

c) Orchestration capabilities: Turn coordination into concerted action

A portfolio spanning these different activities creates an orchestration problem. In the UK, relevant capabilities are distributed across ministries, export credit agencies, DFIs, technical programmes, regulators, research organisations and businesses, with institutions operating under different mandates and degrees of independence. Orchestration may also involve collaboration with other governments and multilateral institutions. Their specialisation is valuable, and their mandates should not be collapsed into a single delivery channel. Effective orchestration does not require formal control over the institutions involved. It can work through influencing: providing direction and information, mobilising capabilities and investment, aligning policies and instruments and removing

[10] This reflects related portfolio thinking in mission-oriented and systems investing literature, where linked interventions are organised around a shared direction of change and adjusted through learning rather than treated as a collection of standalone projects (Conway, 2026; Hofstetter and Paterson, 2026).

barriers (Janssen et al., 2026). It requires enough agency at the right level to identify missing capabilities, connect and sequence interventions and surface trade-offs. That role also needs legitimacy: institutions and teams owning the relevant levers need to see how participation relates to their own mandates, while the orchestrating function needs clarity about what it can decide, influence, convene or escalate. Governance arrangements can create a place for this work to happen, but their existence tells us little about whether it actually does.

Development finance illustrates both the value of specialisation and the challenge of orchestration. BII has capabilities that are unusual among bilateral DFIs, particularly its ability to take direct equity positions and create specialist investment platforms such as Globeleq and Gridworks. Its more recent market-building work also combines investment with technical assistance, policy engagement and partnerships to address constraints beyond an individual transaction (BII, 2022; BII, 2026). The challenge is connecting these capabilities more consistently to wider country and partnership objectives. As the Manufacturing Africa and Transforming Energy Access examples above show, technical assistance can help develop investment opportunities for BII and other investors, while FCDO's policy work can address regulatory and other constraints affecting investments. However, there is evidence of missed opportunities for closer collaboration between BII and FCDO, and mixed evidence on coordination between BII and overseas missions over investment decisions and on alignment with partner-country priorities (IDC, 2023; IDC, 2026). FCDO sets BII's overall strategic framework but does not direct individual investments. Effective orchestration therefore depends on information-sharing and working relationships through which country teams and programmes can identify and develop opportunities, address constraints and connect BII's specialist capabilities to the wider portfolio, while retaining the investment discipline and independence that give those capabilities their value. Research on collaboration between donor-funded private sector development programmes and DFIs points to the same practical problem: these links remain uneven and depend on crossover knowledge, dedicated capacity and people able to work across institutional boundaries (van Rhyn, 2024).

The Philippines GIP+ illustrates the same challenge across a wider set of institutions. The ambition is that BII brings specialist investment platforms and impact capital, UK Export Finance (UKEF) guarantees commercial loans, PIDG specialises in project -development and local currency guarantees, and MOBILIST works on public capital markets, alongside UK technical experts supporting wider regulatory aspects (FCDO, 2026f). Together, these could provide a useful set of capabilities around infrastructure. But drawing on them in pursuit of shared

economic objectives requires aligning their contributions and resolving barriers between institutions. Another example is the GIP with South Africa, which was launched in 2024 as a broad economic partnership but has since generated more specific outputs, including an infrastructure partnership aimed at addressing project-delivery constraints through technical expertise while opening opportunities for UK firms (HM Treasury, 2025). The South Africa example suggests movement from static 'offers' to more bespoke and dynamic responses to partner objectives aligned with UK long-term interests.

The orchestration challenge also applies to collaboration with allies in third countries, especially for smaller powers such as the UK. In Kenya, the UK has supported an Africa Green Industrialisation Initiative (AGII) secretariat under the Ministry of Transport, bringing together the Government of Kenya with G7 partners, the World Bank, African Development Bank (AfDB) and UN around priority transport investments. Convening these partners in response to demands from the Kenyan president has supported deeper coordination around a portfolio of projects in Nairobi (G7, 2024; G7, 2025). This illustrates how international collaboration can be organised around partner country priorities and concrete delivery problems, rather than simply bringing together the existing offers of external partners.

Across these examples, deeper and more directional coordination is difficult to sustain without a dedicated connective capability to support country teams and maintain the guidance, resources and processes that make the model workable at scale. This is not an argument for a new 'super-agency' concentrating delivery or a 'secretariat' understood mainly as a facilitation function for stakeholder engagement, arranging meetings and sharing information. It points instead to what Kattel et al. (2026) describe as a stronger organisational middle layer, capable of translating strategic direction into coordination across a distributed system. This depends on multidisciplinary teams able to translate across different policy, programme and financial cultures, combining country delivery experience with specialist private sector, economic, infrastructure and programme expertise. They need to be able to respond to the varied challenges that arise through orchestration: linking technical assistance and policy interventions to unlock future investment, balancing short-term commercial opportunities with longer-term market-shaping efforts, or sharing know-how on how to engage effectively with an arm's-length delivery agency.

FCDO's advisory cadres provide one example of how such specialist capability can be accessed within a foreign ministry. Its Private Sector Development competency framework encompasses market systems, political economy,

investment and finance, trade and supply chains, green growth and innovation (FCDO, 2026a). Other cadres include infrastructure and energy, climate, health, education, social development, conflict, statistics and evaluation. No single team can contain all of this expertise, so the operating model needs to make specialist knowledge accessible at the point where strategy and delivery decisions are made, including through shared centres of expertise, programmes and external specialists. The Jobs and Inclusive Growth and Green Cities, Infrastructure and Energy Centres of Expertise illustrate attempts to create this connective capability by linking country-based advisers with specialist sector, firm, infrastructure and financing expertise that can be deployed flexibly (FCDO, 2025c; FCDO, n.d.).

d) Building organisational intelligence: Understand what the partnership is changing, not just what each instrument delivers

Pursuing long-term economic objectives involves making bets about how economies might change over time. These bets need to be informed by evidence, with their underlying assumptions made explicit through theories of change and meaningful indicators. This can help establish what progress would look like and give different institutions a common understanding of what they are contributing towards. This requires assessing not only whether an instrument performs well on its own terms, but also whether the activity it enables advances the purpose of the wider portfolio. Measures such as jobs supported or finance mobilised can capture part of that picture, but are rarely sufficient. Depending on the objective, measures of success may need to track productive capabilities, technology adoption, domestic value addition and regulatory capacity in the partner economy, alongside outcomes such as market access, outward investment, R&D links or supply-chain resilience on the UK side. The same applies to distributional and environmental effects. A portfolio that expands investment while concentrating value capture, worsening economic inequality or locking in an environmentally unsustainable development path may be performing well against individual transaction metrics while moving in the wrong direction overall. Not all of this will be available as clean quantitative data, particularly at the level or frequency required, so measurement will often need to combine available indicators with structured qualitative judgement.

In this context, organisational intelligence becomes central. Systems-investing literature describes one aspect of this as ‘systems intelligence’: learning and sensemaking that help actors interpret changes in the wider system and adapt the portfolio, complementing measurement for accountability (Hofstetter and Paterson, 2026). Governments already generate large quantities of data, evaluations and reports, while considerable knowledge remains in the heads of

diplomats, advisers, investment professionals, businesses and partner governments. Connecting these sources into actionable intelligence requires bringing portfolio information together with market intelligence, political economy analysis, evaluation evidence, financial data and practitioner judgement. Together, these can tell a richer story about change: whether interventions are reinforcing one another, whether assumptions still hold, where new constraints are appearing and whether the economic relationship is moving in the intended direction.

It is important to start by getting the basics right: information needs to be recorded at activity level across the portfolio, supported by usable dashboards and country profiles, shared metrics, regular reviews and knowledge systems that retain practitioner experience. With the decline of the aid sector, there is a risk of losing tried and tested practices rather than adapting them to new approaches and objectives. For example, the UK Department for International Development (DFID) developed an annual review process that supported monitoring, learning and accountability, with reviews published through DevTracker (DFID, 2012; ICAI, 2022). A similar annual review discipline could be extended from individual programmes to economic partnerships and portfolios, codifying progress against shared objectives, surfacing delivery constraints and lessons and inviting public scrutiny and accountability. FCDO's new evaluation strategy points towards this broader view by emphasising portfolio-level learning and the need to understand how programming, policy and diplomacy interact across a country or theme (FCDO, 2026b). Modern knowledge infrastructure and artificial intelligence (AI) can make dispersed evidence easier to search and connect across complex portfolios (FCDO, 2026b), but the deeper challenge is creating routines and incentives through which information is interpreted collectively and used to change decisions.

Organisational intelligence should create a feedback loop in which delivery tests assumptions and informs portfolio choices, programme commissioning, instrument design and resource allocation. This is consistent with the wider shift towards 'test and learn' in the UK government, which emphasises structured testing, feedback and adaptation where policy operates under conditions of complexity and uncertainty (HM Treasury and Evaluation Task Force, 2026). Working through live problems in a country can also expose limitations in existing instruments, central guidance, data systems and ways of working, allowing lessons from delivery to inform changes to the wider operating model.

6. Conclusion: Reflections for policy and practice

The UK experience suggests that moving beyond toolkits and broad mutual benefit language requires more than coordinating existing instruments. It requires changes in how governments establish priorities, deploy resources and learn from delivery. In the UK's case, this means that overseas missions need sufficient agency to develop objectives with partner governments and orchestrate relationships locally, while drawing on the strategy, instruments and specialist capabilities held at the centre. How this balance is achieved will vary across institutional systems, particularly in countries with large public development banks or implementing agencies (Basedow et al., 2026). The deeper challenge will remain, which is to embed these capabilities in durable organisational structures and routines, rather than leaving them dependent on exceptional teams or temporary efforts (Kattel et al., 2026; Cabinet Office, 2025). Initiatives such as Global Gateway, PGII and JETPs operate through different institutional arrangements but raise similar questions. Further comparative work, examining institutions and delivery practices in similar detail as this paper has, could explore how these differences affect the setting of priorities, orchestration of capabilities, resource allocation and learning.

Western governments have recognised that their relationships with the Global South need to adapt, while governments in the Global South are drawing on a wider range of international relationships to pursue their own strategies. For Western governments, responding to these changes requires reconsidering both the economic objectives of partnerships and the institutions and ways of working through which they are pursued. Without change on both fronts, new initiatives risk repackaging existing instruments under new strategic language while reproducing much of the same operating logic. However, more effective institutions do not, in themselves, determine what kinds of economic change partnerships will bring about or who benefits. The UK examples examined here provide more insight into institutional capabilities than into how economic priorities and trade-offs are negotiated and whose interests shape those choices. A fuller assessment would ask whose productive capabilities and material living conditions improve on both sides, who has the power to shape those outcomes, and how economic power, benefits and risks are distributed within and between the economies involved.

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