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UK aid policy these days is focused on promoting UK trade interests abroad, with the government adopting a global business promotion approach for UK firms.

The linking of aid and trade of course has a history in Britain. In 1994 the Pergau dam scandal in which aid was used as a sweetener for an arms deal led to the commitment to untie aid. It also led to the establishment of a separate development department and an Act of Parliament specifying how aid must be spent.

This consensus on aid since the mid-1990s, however, is now under threat.

Trade and investment can of course help reduce poverty, promote women s empowerment and be good for children s rights. But the opposite may be true too. There are many different business models and so labour, environmental and rights regimes with very different outcomes. We ve been looking at some of these issues over the last few years across a number of projects. All were funded by the UK s Department for International Development.

The project compared three broad types of commercial agricultural investment: estates and plantations; medium-scale commercial farms; and outgrower schemes. The team looked at each business model in Ghana, Kenya and Zambia, examining the outcomes for land, labour, livelihoods and so on.

Cases included investments with UK-linked companies such the much-feted Blue Skies company in Ghana, which packages and exports fruit produced by smallholder outgrowers. Another was the rather bizarre sugar outgrower scheme in Zambia, operated by Illovo, which is now largely owned by British Foods, whereby smallholders land is incorporated into an estate and they are paid revenues for the use of land.

The findings showed that the terms of incorporation into business arrangements really mattered. Too often estates or plantations operated as enclaves separated from the local community; some provided employment opportunities but frequently with poor conditions. Smallholder-led outgrower arrangements, where influence over terms was effective, had substantial linkage effects with the local community.

A decade ago, at the height of Africa s land rush, many investments were deemed to be land grabs . But our work argued for a more nuanced assessment. Not all investments are bad. But not all are good either. Linking investment to the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation's "Voluntary Guidelines is essential. This allows investors, governments and recipient communities to make balanced appraisals, avoiding investment riding roughshod over local land rights and livelihoods.

Hidden networks

Another project, part of the Agricultural Policy in Africa programme, has focused on agricultural investment corridors in Kenya (LAPSSET), Tanzania (SAGCOT) and Mozambique (Beira and Nacala). Alongside Chinese, Brazilian and other investors, UK in-