

Political and adaptive development cooperation

Approaches for the implementation of a feminist development policy

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Bonn, 6 March 2023. With their presentation of a feminist foreign policy (FFP) and a feminist development policy (FDP), the Federal Foreign Office and the Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development are realigning their work by focussing on gender equality. On 1 March, they presented their respective guidelines and strategy. Both refer to the “3 Rs” that former Swedish Foreign Minister Margot Wallström coined in 2014 as the goals of the first ever FFP: equal rights, resources, and representation. Since the content is now clear, the question is how to implement it. As a substantial part of German development policy, how must bilateral development cooperation (DC) change to do justice to the transformative claim of FDP?

The implementation of feminist development policy
Feminist approaches have the transformative claim of overcoming patriarchal systems of power. To implement this, foreign and development policy can transform internal structures and processes and advocate for the 3 Rs internationally. Beyond that, development

policy is very broadly and deeply anchored in partner countries through bilateral DC, where the day-to-day implementation of projects takes place. If the transformative claim of FDP is taken seriously, the way DC works must also change at this level.

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The strategy of FDP already contains several announcements in this regard, such as a stronger context orientation, closer partner exchanges and an examination of the potential participation of local civil society in future project cycles. However, new, integrated approaches for bilateral DC are not envisaged – although these would have great potential for the implementation of FDP.

Building on insights from development policy

For the implementation of FDP, political and adaptive development assistance (PADA) approaches are particularly promising. These approaches, such as *Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation* (PDIA), *Coalitions for Change* and *Thinking and Working Politically* (TWP), emerged after 2012 in response to the realisation that, although DC often formulates normatively ambitious goals, it rarely achieves the degree of institutional change necessary to achieve them.

This problem has long been known as the “implementation gap”. Many countries have progressive laws – also with regard to women’s rights and gender equality – but the reality often looks different. The reasons for this are political and social resistance as well as weak state institutions. In order to have a transformative effect in the long term, DC must therefore also support de facto implementation. This is only possible by strategically working on the ground with local actors and resources while taking existing realities into account.

PADA approaches, which have received little attention in Germany so far, are characterised by five features. First, they are context-specific, in that they are guided by an ongoing analysis of the local context (“best fit”) and build on local potential (“pockets of effectiveness”). Second, they are politically informed, that is, they emphasise working with the political dynamics on the ground. Third, implementation is locally embedded; as they promote a long-term perspective, they focus on

working closely with local actors, or putting them in charge. Fourth, implementation is highly adaptive, responding to changes in context and emerging opportunities. Finally, the approaches are learning-oriented – through reflection within the project and through accompanying research, there is continuous and systematic learning from failures as well as successes. These five characteristics are closely linked iteratively.

Studies on reforms as diverse as public financial management in Southern Africa, land rights in the Philippines or health and education in Nigeria suggest that PADA can be more effective than mainstream approaches in many contexts. This applies to fragile contexts in which local room for manoeuvre must be carefully explored, as well as to projects intended to strengthen the 3 Rs on the ground in a factual and sustainable way. For this, too, it is necessary to break down the goals to the conditions on the ground and to engage in local negotiation processes to advance long-term change, often in small steps. Since they were specifically developed for this kind of DC and there being much experience and many instruments to apply, PADA approaches should be taken into account for the implementation of FDP.

Adjust development policy frameworks

However, the framework conditions of German DC are currently not geared towards the implementation of highly locally adaptive approaches such as PADA. Consideration should therefore be given to adjusting them. This includes enabling more flexible, impact-oriented project management and financing as well as moving away from the practice of dividing projects into planning, implementation, and evaluation phases in favour of learning-based, adaptive processes. Moreover, the greater involvement of non-governmental actors, more systematic accompanying research and the establishment of a constructive error and learning culture within and between organisations are important aspects.

Many of these demands coincide with those formulated by civil society organisations during the consultation process for the development of FDP. And as far as currently possible, individual DC projects are already trying to work according to PADA principles. The development policy framework should promote this way of working rather than prevent it. This would be an important step towards the systematic implementation of an FDP with transformative aspirations and a local sense of possibility.