



Competencies to Help Shape a Changing World

Tracer Study and Future Focus of the IDOS Postgraduate Programme for Sustainability Cooperation

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Summary

The Postgraduate Programme for Sustainability Cooperation (PGP) at the German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS, formerly DIE) has been training young professionals for German and European international cooperation since 1965. How successful is the programme in supporting its graduates in starting their career and in developing their competencies? And what direction should Germany take in future in its training for professionals in the field of international cooperation? To mark its 60th anniversary, IDOS conducted a tracer study to systematically analyse how the programme has benefited its some 1,000 graduates and to find some pointers on how it could be developed further.

The study very clearly demonstrates the relevance of the postgraduate programme and identification with the programme over the past 60 years. The feedback confirms that the PGP considerably benefits participants' professional and personal development and that they would definitely recommend it for future generations.

At the same time, the world is undergoing a period of radical upheaval. Fundamental changes can be seen above all in the general conditions for partnerships, the demands made of staff working in this sector and training for future experts and managers. Training programmes such as the PGP must adapt to address these drastic changes. The quality of a training programme is ultimately re-

flected in how well it promotes basic competencies that will still be useful under different conditions and that can help shape these changes.

IDOS graduates were also asked about their views on changes in working in the international cooperation sector. The survey thus allows conclusions to be drawn on how training can be developed further:

1. Training should promote various competencies that can shape cooperation for sustainable development. Taking a partner-oriented approach to initiating and implementing changes in an increasingly complex world requires both specialist and systemic knowledge along with personal, social, networking and cooperation skills.
2. Training institutions should promote the capacity for cooperation through joint learning with international partners. This will foster understanding for other perspectives and will support the ongoing development of partnerships.
3. Post-colonial perspectives and a critical examination of power should already be taken into account during training and should be put into practice in concrete cooperation between organisations. IDOS graduates also believe that these aspects are becoming more important in international cooperation.

German training programmes for international cooperation

Successful international cooperation (IC) requires both specialist expertise and an understanding of different realities of life and world views. This means that trainees and early- to- mid-career experts need not only relevant university qualifications but also practical experience and networks. This is where the value of traineeships and job shadowing opportunities, but also targeted training and networking measures for selected experts lies. The combination of knowledge, practical relevance and networks is crucial for experts' personal capacity.

German training programmes for international cooperation take different points of reference as their starting points. They cover areas ranging from the acquisition of more in-depth knowledge and research papers through to practical experience and actually starting out on a career path. The programmes include *weltwärts* and *kulturweit*, the ASA Programme, postgraduate programmes such as those offered by the Seminar for Rural Development (SLE) and IDOS, and trainee programmes such as the German Development Cooperation (DC) Trainee Programme run by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ). There are also programmes offered by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), a bilateral joint research fund run by the German Research Foundation (DFG) with research organisations in middle-income countries, and programmes for specific regions run by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, all of which contribute to knowledge creation and networking in the German university sector.

Within this diverse landscape, the IDOS Postgraduate Programme for Sustainability Cooperation (PGP; formerly the Postgraduate Training Programme of the German Development Institute – DIE) aims to promote young professionals by helping them to acquire competencies for a development and sustainability agenda understood as “cooperation policy”. The programme promotes

specialist and systemic knowledge while also offering practical experience and networking opportunities.

An overview of the tracer study on the PGP is given below. As part of the founding momentum for what used to be the DIE, the training programme has continually adapted to change and has helped influence developments over the decades. In IDOS' 60-year history, the world has undergone several upheavals and radical changes. What key features have persisted over this 60-year period? And what changes to the PGP are necessary in view of the current seismic shift in the international order? What results are relevant to other training programmes in IC too?

Tracer study: 60 years of the IDOS Postgraduate Programme

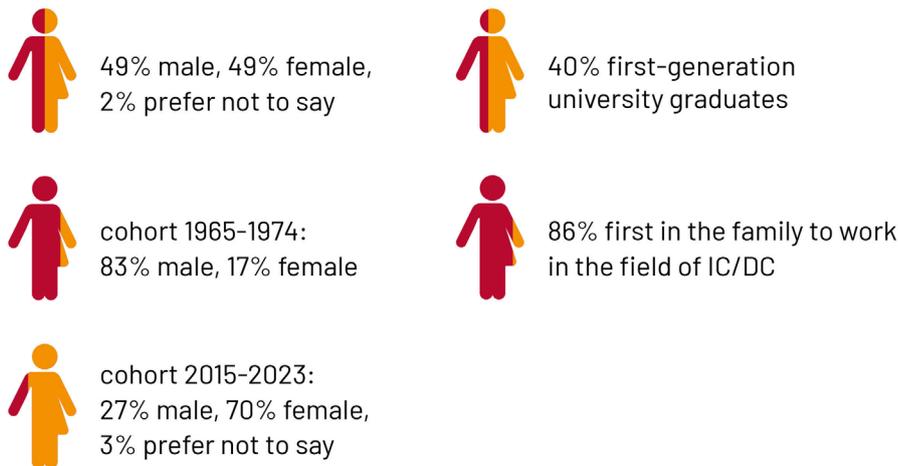
The study is based on an online survey of all graduates from the year groups from 1965 to 2023. Around 800 alumni were reached, of whom 366 took part in the survey – a response rate of 46 per cent. The evaluation compared cohorts (10-year groups) in order to gain an idea of changes over time and at the same time to ensure that participants remained anonymous.

Socio-demographic characteristics

It is important to understand the socio-demographic make-up of participants in order to recognise which groups have been under-represented in a programme to date and to interpret results where necessary.

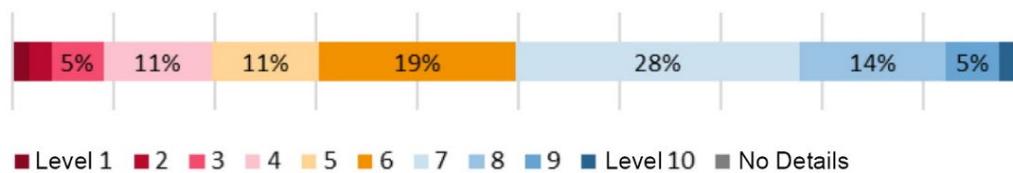
The gender ratio is balanced in the overall group of graduates surveyed, but the share of women has increased considerably over time and they have been in the majority in recent years.

Figure 1: Socio-demographic characteristics: gender and family background



Source: IDOS

Figure 2: Subjective assessment of socio-economic family background



Source: IDOS

Overall, first-generation university graduates account for 40 per cent, but this share is decreasing over time (27 per cent in the most recent year group). This decrease should also be seen in the context of general developments, as the share of people with a university education in Germany has increased considerably over time. A clear majority (86 per cent) of PGP graduates are the first in their family to work in the field of DC/IC.

On a social ladder in which level 10 indicates those people with the most money and the best-paid jobs and level 1 those with the least money and the worst-paid jobs or no job at all, around half of the graduates placed their parents in the highest levels (7-10), while 20 per cent placed them in the lowest levels (1-4). The subjective assessment of participants' socio-economic family background has risen over time. The share of graduates with first-hand experience of migration has been low over the past 60 years. This may reflect inequalities in the education sector across

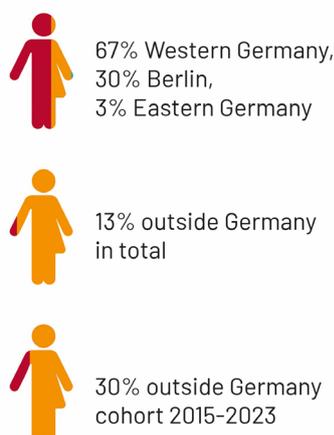
society in general and is thus a task for society as a whole. However, this has become an increasingly unsatisfactory explanation in recent years. A further reason might be found in the admission criteria applied up until recently: 97 per cent of the graduates are German nationals by birth; this was in effect an admission criterion up until 2024, as a command of German at native speaker level was expected and tested. Non-EU citizens were excluded from the programme.

Moreover, persons with a disability or with chronic health-related physical, psychological or cognitive impairments account for a comparably low share (2 per cent) of PGP participants. This might be explained by the fact that work in this sector often requires frequent travel. Here, too, further questions arise, however.

Of the graduates surveyed, relatively few already had children or caring responsibilities when they took part in the PGP (6 per cent in total).

The majority of the participants had been living either in Berlin or in Western Germany before they took part in the PGP, while only few had been living in what used to be East Germany. Historically speaking, the reasons for this are obvious up to 1990. Yet even in the year groups since reunification, people who used to live in the eastern part of Germany have only accounted for between 3 and 5 per cent, hence considerably less than their share of the total population. The number of graduates who lived abroad before joining the programme has risen considerably: they account for a third of the most recent cohort.

Figure 3: Socio-economic characteristics: place of residence before joining the PGP



Source: IDOS

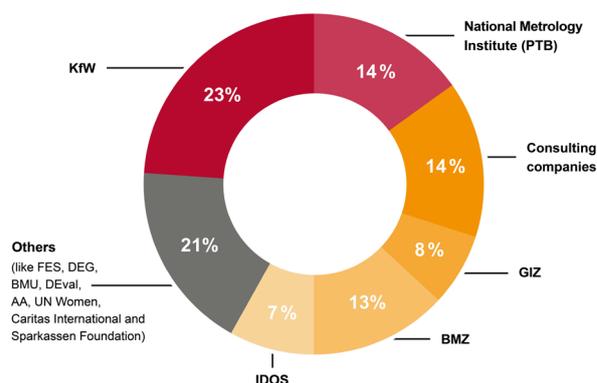
The survey helps to understand what background our participants have and to identify which groups have been under-represented in the programme up to now. A reform of the programme undertaken in 2024 (see the box on p. 8) was also designed to address these groups more effectively in future. Greater diversity of backgrounds among our participants enables a variety of perspectives, reflects social realities and meets the requirements of modern work cultures.

Careers and employers

Almost all participants are or were employed after completing the programme; unemployment is rare among PGP graduates.

The PGP trains participants for careers in the key IC/DC organisations. Over the entire period, the main employers for early-career graduates are core organisations of official DC: the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), KfW Development Bank and GIZ (and its predecessor organisations). The second most common area of work in which PGP graduates find their first job is consulting. KfW and Germany's National Metrology Institute (PTB) have become increasingly important as first employers in recent years.

Figure 4: First employer of PGP graduates (50th-60th course)



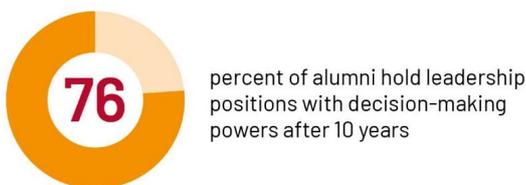
Source: IDOS

Few graduates continue to work for their first employer permanently and this share decreases with the length of career. The majority begin their career as employees, with a small share working as civil servants or in a self-employed capacity. Over time, the share of civil servants in the most recent cohorts has risen again. In contrast, self-employment is more widespread in the middle cohorts during economically more challenging times. In the course of their career, many graduates work for ministries (primarily the BMZ but also others), international organisations, (political) foundations and research institutes. Five

years after completing the programme, around half the graduates work at the BMZ, GIZ or KfW. A fifth of the graduates surveyed had worked for the BMZ during the course of their career or were still working there at the time of the survey.

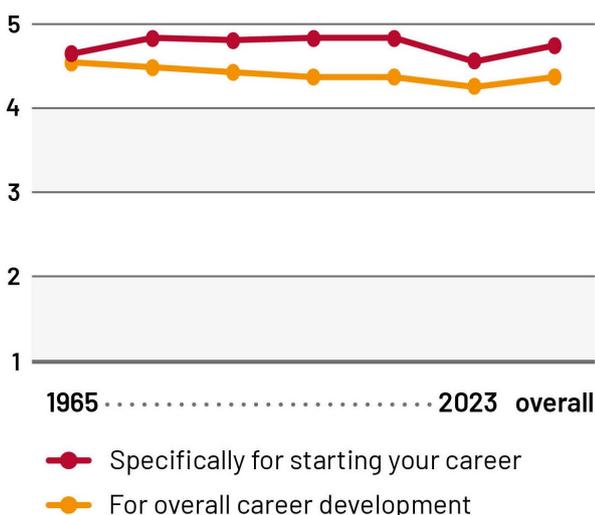
The share of graduates in leadership positions (all positions from the lowest to the highest management level based on respondents' own information) increases as they gain professional experience: directly after graduating, around a fifth have leadership responsibility; five years later, this has increased to half of graduates, and after ten years, three quarters.

Figure 5: Share of graduates in leadership positions



Source: IDOS

Figure 6: Impact of the PGP on professional development



Note: For the question 'How did PGP influence your career path?', possible answers ranged from 1 (very negative) to 5 (very positive).

Source: IDOS

Programme assessment and capacity development

Seventy-two per cent of the PGP graduates work in jobs closely related to the programme content. Ninety-six per cent rate the programme as (very) positive for starting their career.

Ninety-two per cent of the graduates say that participating in the programme has been of great benefit for their professional development, while 83 per cent say the same for their personal development. These percentages remain high over all the cohorts, although they have been decreasing slightly among the most recent year groups (before the programme was reformed in 2024).

Across all the 60 year groups, the PGP participants confirmed that the programme particularly strengthens competencies connected with cooperation, intercultural communication, critical thinking, systems thinking and communication skills. Graduates also mention benefits relating to project management, strategic action, teamwork and networking. In this context, 23 per cent see further potential for greater support in areas such as conflict management, project management and career competencies.

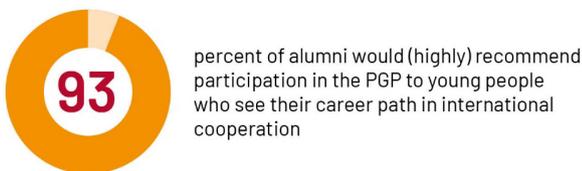
The PGP is particularly valued for the opportunity it offers for acquiring experience abroad, gaining insight into international cooperation, networking and working in teams. A total of 93 per cent of the graduates would recommend the programme to other young people interested in a career in DC/IC. The share of graduates who recommend it without reservation has been decreasing slightly in the most recent year groups, presumably partly due to financial cuts in the policy area.

Figure 7: Impact of the PGP on developing knowledge, skills and competencies



Source: IDOS

Figure 8: Recommendation of the PGP to others



Source: IDOS

Individual criticisms were voiced concerning an overemphasis on academic aspects and the cost and time involved in taking part in the programme. It used to be common practice for participants to have to pay for the course themselves or take out a loan, which would explain the financial criticism, but this was changed to a grant model in 2024.

“The traditional division between experts from the Global North and recipients in the Global South has long since become obsolete. Today, the focus is on key competencies on the global labour market, on forging pragmatic alliances to address social challenges and on strategic negotiating skills to benefit everyone involved.” (PGP graduate)

Even though the skills and competencies required in this area of work are changing over time, cooperation, intercultural communication, critical thinking, systems thinking and communication will certainly be of continuing relevance for people working in the field of international cooperation.

Contacts and network

Most graduates remain in touch with the other people on their course on a long-term basis and around half also maintain contact with graduates from other year groups. The tracer study shows how important these contacts are, especially for graduates’ personal development and for starting their career. More recent year groups in particular would welcome more networking, which they also hope to achieve through a mentoring programme organised by graduates themselves.

Direct networking with young professionals from other regions of the world has not been focused on until more recently. Over the last few years, as a result of IDOS running further programmes and through networking among the participants, IDOS has become a place for future leaders in IC to meet. The Managing Global Governance programme (with young professionals from rising global powers and Europe) and the Shaping Futures programme (with future leaders from Africa and Europe) both enable participants to cooperate and build trust among the group. They thus potentially offer an important network as the basis for working together in the future. However, these developments are too recent to be reflected in the survey of graduates from the past 60 years.

Future of the area of work: trends

The PGP graduates were also asked about changes they expected to happen in the DC/IC labour market – changes that provide valuable ideas and suggestions about refining the curriculum and hence the future of the programme.

PGP alumni believe that the labour market is likely to shrink and will offer fewer permanent positions and more limited-term or project-related employment contracts. The traditional secondment of experts from the Global North will presumably become less relevant in future, while local expertise and South-South partnerships are becoming more important.

Cooperation competencies and a partnership-based approach must therefore be a priority area of training. Germany is becoming more important as a place of work and the demands made of job candidates are becoming more specialised. Political changes and a stronger focus of DC/IC on national interests are expected, as is integration into other policy areas (e.g. climate, economy, security). Digitalisation, the use of artificial intelligence (AI) and innovative financing models look set to acquire greater importance.

Challenges identified by the graduates include cuts in public funding, growing uncertainty and competition for jobs along with pressure to justify funding and the need for social legitimacy of DC/IC. Resilience, adaptability and robustness in times of crisis are becoming more important, both for the professional sector as a whole and at an individual level. These skills must also be promoted during training, above and beyond sectoral expertise.

At the same time, the alumni see opportunities: international cooperation, sustainability and socio-ecological transformation continue to be key topics in the search for solutions to global challenges.

According to the respondents, the following topics are becoming increasingly relevant:

- global power shifts,
- climate and environmental issues,
- the circular economy,
- urban development,
- migration,
- good governance and
- gender equality.

Moreover, greater attention is being devoted to interfaces between policy areas and the development of future scenarios. As a result, there is a growing need for specialists with expertise on key topics of the future and with methodological expertise on developing future scenarios. Particularly in times of disruption and crisis, innovation and research should become more important. The respondents assume that flexible, interdisciplinary ways of working, policy advice and change management, networks, partnerships and the integration of research and practice will become increasingly significant. They also anticipate that the private sector may play a greater role and assume more responsibility.

The following competencies are regarded as being particularly important in training for future experts:

- sectoral and methodological competencies: project management, monitoring and evaluation, data analysis, financing expertise, negotiation skills and sectoral competence (e.g. climate, health);
- digital competencies: dealing with AI, digital tools, social media, e-governance and data protection;
- political and strategic competencies: geopolitical understanding, policy advice, communication of complex contexts, knowledge of international agreements;
- intercultural competencies: an understanding of diversity and of global power structures, language skills, international experience;
- personal and social competencies: flexibility, resilience, critical thinking, ability to work in a

team, communication and conflict resolution skills;

- networking and career competencies: active networking, peer learning, career planning outside traditional DC institutions too.

A competency model developed for the three dialogue and training formats at IDOS provides a systematic classification of cooperation and transformation competencies (IDOS 2025). Many of the aforementioned competencies are covered by the model, which also focuses on transformation competencies to open up pathways to sustainable futures.

In terms of developing the PGP further, the alumni recommend a greater focus on practical experience, closer links between research and practice, involvement of external experts, sectoral specialisation, application-oriented formats and a willingness to engage in discussions on controversial topics (e.g. on diversity and post-colonialism). Practical experience abroad and interdisciplinary projects continue to be key elements in training for the PGP target group.

The future trends mentioned by our graduates reflect far-reaching global changes that we are currently experiencing in international cooperation and that the training programmes must respond to in order to be fit for the future.

Conclusion: radical changes in the area of work and in the promotion of young talent

International cooperation is undergoing a paradigm shift, creating different new demands of staff and young professionals.

Based on the survey, the following priorities appear to be relevant to training programmes – and hence to the PGP too – in order to train experts and leaders who can shape the future of international cooperation in a changing world.

- **Orientation towards competencies for the sector:** In future, sectoral expertise will be required in combination with competencies connected with analysis and understanding, cooperation and transformation.
- **Focus on cooperation and a partnership-based approach** in order to develop internationally shared futures and to create fair relationships in the face of unequal power resources. This also includes a greater European dimension in global cooperation.
- **Establishing and promoting international networks** with a view to creating and maintaining relationships of trust in a volatile world. Particularly in disruptive times, personal, broad-based international contacts are essential.

Reform of the PGP

The PGP underwent a fundamental reform in 2024, which is not yet reflected in the survey due to the date of data collection. We conclude from the results of the tracer study that the changes are in line with the suggestions made by our graduates in many cases:

- The PGP is actively seeking to make the programme more diverse (including more international) by changing its admission criteria, the initial results of which appear to be very positive. By introducing a grant programme, it also aims to achieve broader social diversity.
- The PGP is focusing more heavily on competencies, in particular in the areas of analysis and understanding, cooperation and transformation.
- A more partner-centred approach during the programme's three-month cooperative fieldwork phase and closer networking with participants of other programmes that focus on the Global South will promote cooperation competencies and a capacity for reflection in post-colonial contexts.
- In the reformed curriculum, slots ("spotlights") can be used flexibly to accommodate newer topics or current, dynamic changes in our increasingly volatile world.

- **Promotion of diversity in the programme** to balance out opportunities, reduce blind spots and enable innovative solutions to be developed on the basis of diverse perspectives.

Due to budget cuts, there is currently little scope for promoting young talent and recruiting young professionals. At the same time, however, particularly in the current age of radical change, we need to invest in training and in junior staff in order to facilitate partnerships in a volatile world – now and in the future too in contexts undergoing fundamental change. International cooperation will remain an important field of activity and, despite all the changes that are happening, it will continue to be significant for the future viability of a globally connected country like Germany.

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