

The 2025 German Federal Election

International development cooperation is in Germany's national interest

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Bonn, 27 January 2025. As the German federal election approaches, the debate about foreign aid has sharpened. In recent years, discussions have often been fuelled by misinformation, for example regarding projects like a cycleway in Peru, part-financed by Germany, or metro lines in India facilitated by KfW development bank credit lines. This misinformation mostly stems from actors on the far right of Germany's political spectrum, which have been keen to portray international development cooperation as a pointless exercise in woke do-goodery run by liberal fools who think they are saving the world.

This is not an easy discussion for people who work in development cooperation, most of whom are motivated by concerns about global solidarity and sustainability rather than their own interests or those of their country. Furthermore, a core principle of international development cooperation is that partner country interests are paramount. Nevertheless, German voters who ask why public money is being spent in Africa instead of on German infrastructure (or even Bavarian farmers) deserve to be taken seriously, especially at election time when the stakes are highest.

Development cooperation is highly complex and not every engagement is successful. Indeed, much of the research undertaken at IDOS focusses on understanding what works and what needs to change, both in partner countries and in donor countries and organisations. There are several very good reasons why international development cooperation, financed by the public budget, serves Germany's national interests at the same time as it furthers global solidarity and sustainability.

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One is that international cooperation provides access to political decision makers in other countries. The Chinese and Russian governments know this very well and have increased engagements across the so-called ‘Global South’ in recent decades. China and Russia also know that this requires more than talking, and that you have to put something on the table. China has offered massive investments in infrastructure and industry, while Russia has provided direct support for authoritarian rulers. For Germany, leaving the field to China and Russia would have a direct impact on its security. Russia especially gains strength from its interventions in authoritarian countries. Engagement also helps Germany address major challenges that require cooperation, such as refugee crises. The current situation in Syria is a case in point. Germany is home to many Syrians, has a strong interest in peace and stability in the country, and therefore needs to support Syria's transition.

A second reason is that cooperation provides public goods that benefit everyone. The world is becoming more networked, and international cooperation is increasingly concerned with building connectivity, both virtually and concretely via trade corridors. Public goods require public investment, leading to benefits in terms of economic exchange, knowledge and public health. Much of this takes place via repayable credit finance, which costs Germany little. The private sector also benefits from public goods provision. German corporation Siemens is heavily engaged in connectivity projects, for example in India and Egypt. Such initiatives provide taxes and jobs in Germany. Investments in green technology, such as the major hydrogen production projects in North Africa, aim to provide public goods for a sustainable future locally and internationally. These initiatives are still in their early stages, but have potential to be game changing for Germany's domestic energy and transportation networks.

A third reason is that engagement helps improve living standards in partner countries, which has both indirect and direct benefits for Germany. Development programmes that address local bottlenecks in governance, capacity, production and sustainability can help provide people with personal and economic security and prospects for their families in their home countries. This in turn creates opportunities for German investors and exporters. For those who want to migrate safely, education and training programmes, such as the EU's Talent Partnerships scheme, provide skills and expertise to fill labour shortages in Europe. In turn, better living standards in origin countries make return migration a more attractive option.

Development cooperation evokes the wonderful German term ‘Eierlegende Wollmilchsau’ (egg laying-woolly-milk-pig). Development cooperation is faced with at times unrealistic expectations about solving global and local challenges, often in contexts where powerful actors are resistant to change. Development finance is used for everything from building sewage plants to micro credits to laying fibre optic cables to training police to combating climate change. All of these efforts aim to improve lives and create opportunities everywhere. Germany's international cooperation is as important for its own continued development as a secure, democratic, sustainable and influential country, as it is for the countries where Germany invests public money.