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The Treaty of Aachen, 2019: Opportunities to Strengthen French–German Cooperation on Sustainable Development

Summary

On 22 January 2019, France and Germany signed the Aachen Treaty. Therein, 56 years after the Elysée Treaty, re-emphasising their support for multilateralism, sustainable development and development cooperation.

Despite the ambitions expressed in this document, the signing of the Treaty calls for reflection: to what extent does this type of agreement indeed lead to joint operational approaches and have a real impact on French–German cooperation?

To answer this question, this Briefing Paper analyses the obstacles to a closer French–German cooperation in the field of sustainable international development. It focuses on how these commitments are put into practice at the level of political coordination and project implementation. The analysis is based on about 20 interviews with representatives of French and German ministries, development agencies and think tanks. It finds that things get most complicated at the level of political coordination.

Three main obstacles are identified: slightly diverging strategic visions; an incompatibility between institutional structures concerning the degree of specialisation and the mandates of the ministries responsible for steering aid, as well as the degree to which development agencies are involved in strategic decision-making; and cultural particularities regarding communication and time management. Five recommendations are proposed:

- 1) Protect what has been achieved: the alignment between France and Germany at the political and project implementation levels is an asset in an international context where the focus on national interests is increasing. Such cooperation should thus continue to be supported and reinforced.
- 2) Channel the political momentum to the working level: in order to reinforce their coordination, the two countries could establish a solid and regular follow-up mechanism for each commitment, detailing joint actions, shared objectives and milestones.
- 3) Promote mutual knowledge and trust: personnel exchange between the departments, as well as deep dive sessions on the two countries' activities and strategies would allow increased understanding of each other.
- 4) Share best practices: a balanced and respectful French–German collaboration could be encouraged by the sharing of practices for which one country is more advanced or better positioned than the other (such as the French interministerial coordination or the German project evaluation and monitoring procedures).
- 5) Act jointly or divide the work: in the run-up to each joint Franco-German action, make a deliberate and conscious decision whether the two countries have an interest to act jointly or to divide the work. This decision would allow maximisation of the impact, either by specialising or by working together.

Introduction

For more than 50 years, France and Germany have been linked through different exchange and cooperation formats (Figure 1). The Elysée Treaty of 1963 institutionalised Franco-German cooperation in the political fields of foreign affairs (including development aid), defence, and education and youth. Fifty-six years later, French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel have signed a new treaty of Franco-German friendship in Aachen, which addresses areas such as culture, education, research and mobility, and puts a special emphasis on international relations as well as multilateral and cross-border cooperation.

In addition to such general agreements, France and Germany have signed specific agreements on development cooperation policies. One example are the Franco-German roadmaps, a new version having been signed in July 2019, which translate the political will of French-German rapprochement into concrete measures and ensure their implementation. Memoranda of understanding have also been agreed between the two countries' development banks (1998 and 2019). They aim to enhance financial cooperation through the co-financing of projects or the mutual recognition of procedures.

France and Germany are thus not lacking political commitments and strategies for enhanced cooperation. Nonetheless, French-German collaboration in the field of development cooperation remains opportunity- rather than strategy-driven, and implementation of the commitments has been found to be scarce (DIE & Iddri, 2018). Have these commitments thus been effective as guidelines for action and a common policy?

Review of Franco-German cooperation for sustainable development

The multitude of Franco-German agreements illustrate that Franco-German cooperation in international sustainable development is mainly designed in a top-down way, that is to say on the basis of bilateral agreements and roadmaps, which are then ideally put into practice by coordinated political decisions, which in turn are translated by joint implementation.

The interviews revealed that when commitments at a high political level are in place, Franco-German cooperation works quite well concerning the coordination between the two countries in multilateral institutions: for example, France and Germany have already initiated joint non-papers and have agreed on common positions in international organisations, such as the European Union (EU) and the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Franco-German cooperation is also relatively effective in the implementation of joint projects, through co-financing or the mutual recognition of procedures between the two countries' development banks. However, the analysis of French-German cooperation, conducted on a general level as well as through two case studies (Box 1), reveals weaknesses in bilateral cooperation on strategies and decision-making.

Obstacles to Franco-German cooperation and their consequences

Three obstacles hinder Franco-German cooperation in international sustainable development.

1) The first obstacle relates to slight differences in their strategic visions. While Franco-German cooperation generally seems to be aligned overall, there are certain nuances. Currently, the two countries agree on the importance of development cooperation, the priority for Africa, and the promotion of the private sector in developing countries. However, there are differences regarding the clarity of the strategic vision, the priority given to certain issues and the orientation towards different groups of donors. The case studies illustrate these differences. For example, France is seen as a driving force behind the Sahel Alliance and Germany for the NDC Partnership (NDCP). Regarding the Sahel Alliance, the interviews revealed that Germany shows a strong interest in governance and democracy promotion, whereas France is somewhat sceptical about political conditionality. France gives priority to the region's security, while Germany seeks more to keep security and development separate. These differences in strategic vision thus suggest that France and Germany need to intensify their coordination

Box 1: Case studies on the Sahel Alliance and the NDC Partnership

Sahel Alliance: the Sahel Alliance is an initiative aimed at stepping up coordination among donor countries and increasing the effectiveness of cooperation and development projects in five Sahel countries (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger). The idea for this initiative began in France in late 2016/early 2017. In mid-2017, during the 10th Franco-German Ministerial Council, the Sahel Alliance was officially endorsed by France, Germany and the EU; nine other bilateral and multilateral partners have joined the initiative since then.

NDC Partnership: one of the commitments at the heart of the 2015 Paris Agreement is that each signatory country must prepare, implement and revise its nationally determined contribution (NDC). The NDC Partnership was introduced at the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Marrakech in 2016, an initiative of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), the Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety (BMU) and the World Resources Institute. The partnership provides support to developing countries for their NDCs through technical assistance, easier access to funding for NDC development, and the sharing of experiences from one country to another.

The two case studies were chosen for different reasons: the two initiatives relate to issues that are a priority for both countries; each country is at the origin of one of the two initiatives; and France and Germany are both co-directors of these initiatives, which are based on the pooling of projects and resources.

Source: Krüger & Vaillé (2019)

efforts towards joint objectives, and go beyond project coordination.

2) The second obstacle is related to the incompatibility of institutional structures, that seem to be impeding joint action. France and Germany both have a multitude of institutions that all seem to be involved in shaping development policies. But the two countries show divergences regarding the respective mandates and power of these institutions in the shaping and implementation of policies.

In Germany, the BMZ is dedicated to cooperation and development issues, but is comparatively less powerful than the two ministries mainly responsible for development cooperation in France (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, MEAE, and Ministry of Economy and Finance). In addition, France has an implementation agency (the French Development Agency, AFD), which participates in strategic decision-making, whereas the German development agencies (German Development Bank, KfW, and German Agency for International Cooperation, GIZ) only work on project implementation.

These differences are confirmed by the case study on the NDCP. While the German BMZ and BMU are involved in this initiative, in France it is entrusted to the MEAE only. The MEAE further requested that the AFD (contributing to political decision-making, according to the interviews) attend NDCP steering committee meetings. At the implementation level of the NDCP, the AFD faces the GIZ, in which it does not really identify a counterpart, because the GIZ does not participate in strategic decision-making and focuses on technical cooperation. The incongruence between the institutional structures leads to a slight gap between the two countries regarding the conception and implementation of policies.

3) The third obstacle relates to cultural particularities of each country that manifest themselves in policy-making and project implementation. These are time-based discrepancies, with France working on shorter calendars and working deadlines than Germany. The interviews also reveal different

communication habits, with France using oral forms of communication more often than Germany. These features are well illustrated in the Sahel Alliance case study: while France works with greater flexibility and adopts initiatives more easily due to its shorter-term political agenda, the German approach has a longer-term orientation and focuses on planning.

Recommendations for improved bilateral cooperation

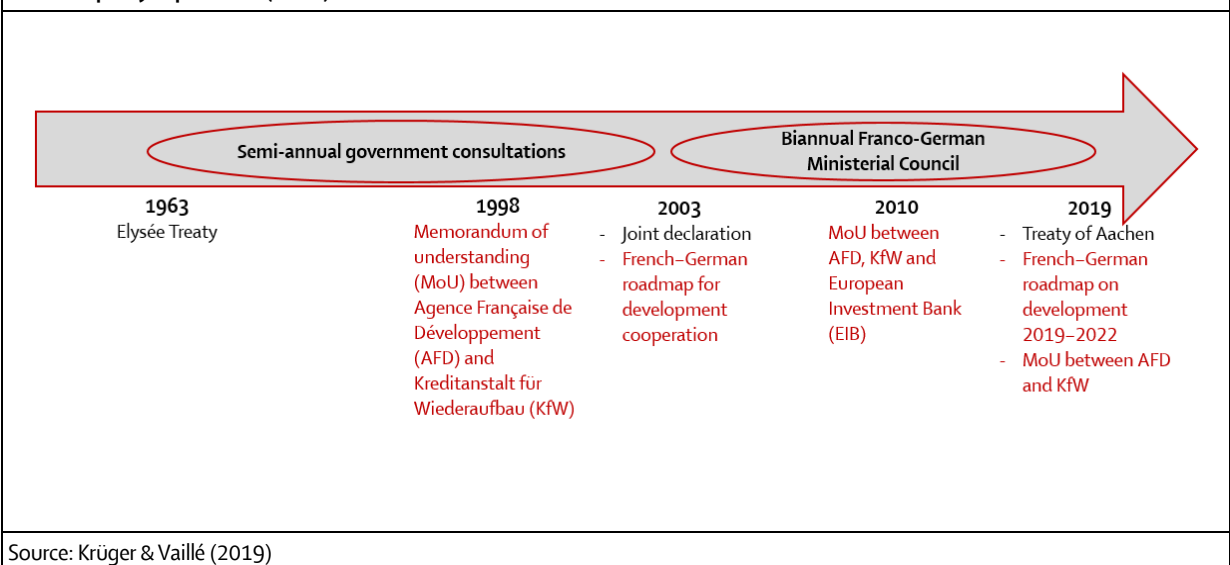
Five recommendations are proposed to overcome these obstacles:

1) Protect what has been achieved: consecutive commitments at the highest political level, the successful formulation of joint positions for multilateral development policy, and cooperation in project implementation are assets to be protected. In an international context where the focus on national interests is increasing, this type of cooperation should continue to be supported and reinforced.

2) Channel the political momentum to the working level via a follow-up mechanism for monitoring the commitments made between the two countries: such a systematic monitoring could be conducted during the Franco-German Ministerial Council or at the meetings held at directors' level (BMZ and MEAE). Interviewees suggested, for example, a mechanism in the form of a matrix listing joint actions conducted so far, common objectives, progress achieved and milestones. Implementation agencies could attend the meetings to facilitate the follow-up of political agreements and thereby better link the two levels.

3) Promote mutual knowledge and trust between French and German administrations through staff exchanges and deep dive sessions: while cultural differences and institutional structures cannot be easily changed, staff can be made aware of them. To this end, it would be beneficial to resume personnel exchanges between BMZ and MEAE to increase the

Figure 1: Chronology of the framework documents of French–German cooperation (in black) and those dealing with development policy in particular (in red)



understanding of each other's way of thinking and working. By extending this to a sufficient number of civil servants over time, such exchanges would have a multiplier effect.

4) Share best practices to achieve a balance between the two countries: a balanced and respectful Franco-German collaboration in development cooperation could be nurtured by the identification and promotion of practices for which one country is more advanced or better positioned than the other. These could be the French model of internal coordination between the different departments responsible for development issues or the German evaluation and monitoring procedures, which are relatively more standardized and homogeneous than in France.

5) With a view to joint action, the two countries should systematically decide whether to share the work or to agree on a common position: while France and Germany cooperate today in one of two ways (division of labour in the case of the Sahel Alliance or the adoption of joint positions as in multilateral forums), the choice frequently appears to be neither deliberate nor systematic. The two countries should thus decide more systematically to act in a concerted manner or to divide the work in those areas where they share a common interest (Africa, climate, etc.). In both cases, the contribution and responsibilities of each country should be clearly defined for each area of cooperation and on the basis of their comparative advantages.

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