



Interest-based Policy Rather than a Save-the-World Approach

Why German Development Cooperation with Africa Must Be Reconsidered

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Germany's interests in Africa are self-evident. They range from business and security to political partnership in the context of global systemic rivalry. But is Germany making use of all its options to preserve its interests on the neighbouring continent? The answer to this is: no! Particularly in view of the immense investments that Germany is making in the field of development cooperation, the question must be raised as to whether these investments could not be made in a much more targeted manner – to the benefit of the African partners, but also in our own interest.

Our View of Africa: Adapting to New Realities

The perception of the African continent in Germany and Europe has long been in need of a fundamental correction. And the shift in our view of the world that is taking place in the course of the so called *Zeitenwende* offers an excellent opportunity for this. “We woke up in a different world today,” said Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock on the morning of 24 February 2022 in response to the Russian attack on Ukraine. Yet the world did not change overnight – it was rather the shock effect of the Russian attack that forced us to face up to a changing reality. The geopolitical rifts and strategic challenges were long in the making.

This applies to developments on the African continent, too. The same kind of paradigm shift that we are observing with regard to our geopolitics and (collective) defence capability is needed in connection with our policy towards African partners. Our strategic action with regard to Africa encompasses a whole range of policy fields and instruments, but it is conventional development cooperation that continues to dominate.

There is some hope that the current debate will give rise to a more pragmatic, realistic and nuanced view of Africa. It is not easy to break through existing perceptions, stereotypes and narratives. A wildly romantic place of longing set against a safari backdrop; a crisis-ridden continent marked by hunger, poverty and war; a continent

of opportunity whose young population heralds a new age – these are probably the three images of Africa that prevail in Germany. They all share the same fundamental problem: they fail to do justice to the continent's complex, heterogeneous and to some extent contradictory dynamics. As African voices often feel compelled to explain to their German counterparts, “Africa is not a country”. This is an insight that should underlie the following considerations here, too. Much more so than in the past, our strategic orientation must leave room for regional and country-specific priorities that reflect the respective individual requirements.

Why is our view of Africa changing? There are essentially two reasons for this. Firstly, this shift has to do with developments on our neighbouring continent itself: contrary to the above-mentioned stereotype of crisis, a great many positive things have happened there. Countries such as Ghana, Uganda, Ethiopia, Sierra Leone, Mozambique and Rwanda have seen high annual economic growth of more than seven per cent. After the twofold slump resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian attack on Ukraine, growth has since returned to high levels in many places. As a result of these developments, a middle class has emerged in many countries. The total number of people in Africa who are counted as belonging to the middle classes has tripled in the past 30 years and is currently estimated at around 330 million people. There are significant differences in terms of distribution, however. In North

Africa, the middle classes are strongest in countries such as Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt. Other countries with a relatively high proportion of the population in the middle classes include Ghana, Namibia, Botswana, Kenya and South Africa.¹ By 2060, the figure is expected to increase to more than half a billion people across the continent as a whole.

At the same time, progress has been made in other areas in Sub-Saharan Africa, too: since the beginning of the millennium, the share of people living in absolute poverty has dropped from 57 to 35 per cent, while life expectancy has increased from 51 to 61 years. What is more, Africa is a young continent. The average age of the population is currently 18.8 years (in Europe it is 42.2).² And it is the continent that is expected to see the most dynamic urban growth in the future. The UN expects the urban population to increase by 174 per cent between 2020 and 2050 (by way of comparison, the equivalent figure for Europe is eight per cent).³ This will have an impact on global demand for services of all kinds, too – a mega-business. Forecasts predict that more roads, bridges, houses, etc. will be built in Africa in the next ten years than were built in Europe in the past 100 years.⁴

Secondly, the altered view of Africa derives from global geopolitical changes. The rise of China as a global alternative to the West, Russia's efforts despite its limited means to act at least as a "spoiler" through arms deliveries and the Wagner Group, and the increasing involvement of other more or less authoritarian states such as Turkey or Saudi Arabia who wish to carve out their own place in the newly emerging world order – all this has brought "new" actors onto the international playing field. All of them have interests in Africa and are seeking to strengthen their economic and political role in the world, not least through increased engagement on this continent. This means that African countries now have a choice. This new situation, which is very positive from the African perspective, also derives from the fact that there are considerable amounts of raw materials and rare earths in African soil. These are crucial to the economy of the future.

This shift in awareness has come very late in Germany. We should not be especially proud of the fact that it has apparently taken a massive geopolitical rift to force us to thoroughly reconsider our perceptions. This is why it is all the more important for us to swiftly demonstrate a more credible approach towards our African partners. In the case of Germany and Europe, there is also the migratory pressure from Africa – something that is already clearly felt in the Mediterranean and indeed everywhere on Europe's southern borders. In places where living conditions and prospects are not improving sufficiently, young people in particular often see only one way out: to flee across the Mediterranean, to Europe. Traditional development cooperation will not be capable of adequately addressing all these challenges.

Old and New Ways of Thinking in Development Cooperation

The debate about the effectiveness and meaningfulness of development cooperation is essentially an old one, and the approach of creating a separate policy field for supporting development in other states has often been dubbed an outdated model. For decades now critical articles have been published that put forward demands ranging from fundamental reforms to the complete abandonment of development cooperation.

After decades of support programmes worth billions, development cooperation has a very mixed record in terms of its effectiveness. In the search for causes, there are two things that come into focus: on the one hand the interplay with other policy fields (such as global trading conditions) and on the other hand the list of unwanted (side) effects of misguided approaches. In view of the high level of expenditure involved, development cooperation is under pressure to justify itself at a domestic level, too. Nonetheless, denying its *raison d'être* is ultimately ignorant and fails to recognise the realities of global interdependency. Maintaining prosperity and peace at home requires engagement abroad, too, and development cooperation is a central piece of the puzzle here.

In this context, it is worth asking what role development cooperation should play in concert with the various other ministries in terms of Germany's strategic foreign action. The traditional way of thinking in development cooperation has long been outdated here, yet it seems to persist. It is based on a misguided interpretation of our historical responsibility combined with a naïve overestimation of our influence. The hubris of the assumption that we could solve the great challenges of other countries based on a logic of aid that is oriented towards our own norms and expectations leads to completely overloaded expectations. The result is that it is hardly possible to meet one's own standards. It is therefore all the more important – not least in external communication – to focus clearly on Germany's key interests and to dovetail development cooperation more effectively with other ministries with a view to achieving more coherent strategic foreign action vis-à-vis our African partners.

Even though the word “aid” has long since been replaced by “cooperation”, the fundamental approach of development cooperation is often perceived as presumptuous and untrustworthy on the African side. When we fail to make our own interests clear, critical voices in Africa accuse us of hypocrisy. They point to our own profit from the “aid business” and the losses they themselves suffer from exploitation, global injustice and trade deficits, which make aid seem little more than a consolation. If, in addition, aid is overloaded with complex requirements, prefabricated concepts and patronising advice, no one should be surprised at being accused of paternalism. Moreover, a logic of pity and trying to save the world promotes a distorted perception in which African partners rightly feel that they are not being taken seriously. Development cooperation can and should offer room for an element of compassion, but this must not result in the assignment of a victim role – which in the final analysis is not infrequently influenced by racism. Africa does not need white saviours!

Development cooperation in its current form does not do justice to the goals it has set itself, nor is it attractive to African countries in view of

the alternatives available. The current impetus coming from the German Federal Government is hardly a step in the right direction. The new Africa Strategy adopted by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) endeavours to convey a more realistic view but remains unspecific as to how this is to be reflected in practice. Moreover, it falls behind previous BMZ strategies and positions with regard to the central issue of promoting private sector engagement. The loudly proclaimed feminist foreign and development policy does in fact pursue an important goal, but in its elaboration and communication it is meeting with considerable resistance on the African side, once again feeding accusations of paternalism.

Five Impulses for a New Development Policy towards Africa

1. Germany's strategic interests belong at the heart of development cooperation.

The economic and political challenges of the past years have left their mark on budget estimates for development cooperation.⁵ In Germany, it can be assumed that the burdens of COVID-19 and the *Zeitenwende* marked by Russia's war on Ukraine will also have an impact on the BMZ budget and on other budgets that Germany can count as official development assistance (ODA). This also increases the necessity to provide a better justification for this expenditure than before and to place it in a context that is more plausible to the people of Germany, too.

All this requires a considerably higher degree of sincerity and consistency. Hesitance in acknowledging our own interests in the context of development cooperation undermines credibility – both at home and abroad. It also weakens a goal-oriented focus of Germany's own resources. The manifold motives of development cooperation cannot be brushed aside. Furthermore, it is explicitly not about undermining the humanitarian and charitable component. After all, this is directly linked to Germany's key interests – especially with regard to promoting stability.

However, a compass for development cooperation that enables prioritisation and focus must place Germany's clearly defined and articulated strategic interests at the centre of action. The emphasis should be on the triad of our most important strategic interests: development of the economy, a strong position in (systemic) competition and the guarantee of stability. In this context, development cooperation must not be a sideshow. It must not solely follow its own logic, but should be pursued in a way that complements and supports other policy fields.

Although the geographical focus on Africa provides an important frame of reference, there is a need for greater differentiation in development cooperation. It is important to avoid simple categorisations and "package deals". Well thought-out and more individualised country approaches provide space for taking strategic interests and priorities into account. It is inadequate to present prefabricated concepts that supposedly apply to the entire continent, for which selected countries can then qualify. Instead, cooperation with each particular country must be negotiated on an individual basis. This does of course require the capacity to give the individual countries the attention they deserve (which, incidentally, also includes the willingness to ensure that those who meet African visitors have the appropriate level of seniority – in other words meet them on an equal footing). But this is a price we must be willing to pay, especially if we are relying on alliances in Africa and with African partners in the context of geostrategic competition.

In this connection, it is also important to intensify dialogue with actors in research, civil society and the private sector, since they can make a significant contribution to developing expertise that is relevant to individual cases. Moreover, Germany urgently needs its own research institute to address the central issues and challenges facing African countries and the continent as a whole. The key task of such an institute would be to competently inform policy-makers, business, society and the media in Germany and Europe about relevant developments on the neighbouring continent. It is very regrettable that plans for

such a project were not implemented in the last legislative period due to disputes between the ministries involved.

2. We must be much more responsive to the interests of our African partners and refrain from paternalism.

Interests-based policy rather than a save-the-world approach: even reduced to this formula, this is a demand that is not at variance with the expectations on the African side. The point here is that development cooperation should also be more responsive to partners' interests, expectations and priorities. This requires a better understanding of perceptions and the genesis of positions on the African side (which might have made it less surprising – especially from a German perspective – that many African states have not condemned Russia for its attack on Ukraine). A clear definition of interests on both sides makes it possible to identify overlaps, map out win-win scenarios, and prioritise when it comes to selecting partners and fields of activity.

It must also be clearly established that corruption and elite capture – the appropriation and exploitation of state resources by a small elite to the detriment of the population at large – are an obstacle to genuine partnership with Germany. And such practices should also be tackled head on. Ultimately, this is also in the interest of the country in question and its people. After all, the accountability of the elites is something that is demanded by civil society representatives in the partner countries in Africa, too. This is also where the criticism of cooperation with a player like China is greatest – which is what we need to take as our starting point.

We should also avoid being accused of introducing a new paternalism into bilateral relations with Africa, however. It is obviously right for us to point out our position on the rights of the LGBTQ community, for example, and to openly communicate our opposition to laws such as those currently being introduced in Uganda.⁶ Yet this must not lead to our entire policy towards this country being held hostage to a single political decision.

Given the increase in systemic rivalry, it would be fatal if we were to furnish our authoritarian opponents with arguments that they would be only too happy to use against the “evil and decadent West”.⁷

We have to recognise the new geopolitical realities. The countries of Africa now have new strategic options, and this goes hand in hand with a new African self-confidence. The West is no longer automatically the first choice on the continent not least because we far too often make offers that do not meet demand on the ground.

A look at the EU’s Global Gateway Initiative is very enlightening in this connection. The EU is looking to generate enormous sums of money together with the private sector to promote development in the Global South (there is talk of 300 billion euros, half of which is to go to Africa). The energy aspect in particular is of outstanding importance as a key factor for economic development in Africa. Yet the EU makes its offer dependent on only supporting “green energy production”. This is certainly correct as a medium-term and long-term goal. However, the exclusion of any support in the area of fossil energy sources means that many partner countries simply do not see this as an attractive offer. They need to swiftly achieve higher levels of electricity production, but this cannot be done using green technology alone (a problem that Europe faced, too, even before the end of cheap gas from Russia). After the *Zeitenwende*, Europe now seems entirely lacking in credibility. We continue to demand from African partners that they switch exclusively to renewable energy production while we ourselves at the same time are seeking gas deals with Senegal and Qatar. Instead, the EU should promote bridging technologies in African countries, too, such as the construction of low-emission gas-fired power plants. This really would meet the interests of the African states, while at the same time potentially providing a sales market for European technology. If such measures were to reduce the share of coal and oil in the energy mix of African countries, they would have a positive impact on the environment, too. And according to calculations by the Mo

Ibrahim Foundation, the negative effects on the global climate would be limited: if all countries in Sub-Saharan Africa (with the exception of South Africa) tripled their energy consumption and used solely gas to do so, this would only increase global CO₂ emissions by 0.6 per cent.⁸

For its part, China has officially announced that it will no longer support coal-fired power plants abroad, but it can be assumed that the People’s Republic will still be open to supporting the construction of gas-fired power plants. If the latter are not of the highest standard in technological terms, Europe would lose out on two counts: it would miss out on orders from Africa while at the same time foregoing the chance to reduce CO₂ emissions in Africa through the use of Europe’s most advanced technology. Or, as the news magazine *Der Spiegel* put it: “While the African Union pushes for funds for lucrative gas production, Europe prefers to promote the expansion of renewable energies. This may make sense from a European environmental policy perspective, but it ultimately remains exactly that: the European perspective.”⁹

3. We should offer cooperation rather than aid and focus on subsidiarity in partnerships.

The donor-recipient relationship that has long prevailed has outlived its usefulness in relation to many partners (though not all). It has long ceased to reflect the continent’s very complex and diverse realities and no longer meets the expectations of our African partners either. Nowadays, it is not primarily unilateral offers of aid that are needed but instead offers of cooperation that take account both of our partners’ interests and of our own.

There is no way around the fact that development progress must ultimately come from within the countries themselves. We can make offers of support, but in doing so we must take our African partners seriously and negotiate with them on an equal footing for mutual benefit. This also means trusting and expecting our counterparts to clearly set out their own priorities and problem-solving approaches. The sometimes lecturing manner

of Western experts and the lack of sensitivity towards local expertise are rightly perceived as disrespectful by African partners. Subsidiarity means taking local autonomy seriously and strengthening it. This obviously might also include calling for efforts to improve framework conditions on the part of African partners.

The aforementioned example of being open to different technologies falls into the category of “making offers of cooperation”. In the field of security policy, too, we should listen much more to what our African partners have to say. We have learned from the difficulties with the Malian government, at least to the extent that regarding the originally planned engagement in Niger, training was supposed to go much further to simulate real-life combat situations with local soldiers – just as African partners have always called for. The large amount of “theoretical instruction” (including training with wooden rifles) on the EUTM training mission caused great frustration on the part of the Malian troops. Particularly in view of the spread of jihadist groups in West and East Africa – a development that has been observed for years – it is hard to understand why this issue is virtually absent from the BMZ’s new Africa Strategy. In the German government’s new National Security Strategy, too, Africa regrettably only receives passing mention – a missed opportunity to elaborate more clearly the strategic orientation towards our neighbouring continent in the area of security policy, too.¹⁰

Despite all the emphasis on focusing on interests and on subsidiarity, a new definition of development cooperation must continue to offer room for genuine aid strategies. This is particularly true with regard to acute humanitarian emergencies, for example resulting from violent conflict, natural disasters and the drastic consequences of climate change. The correct use of development cooperation instruments is crucial here, however. Emergency aid must be swift and uncomplicated, financially sound and internationally coordinated. At the same time, there must be a much greater focus in the medium and long term on crisis prevention, adaptation and resilience. In addition, solidarity-based commitment must not

lead to local elites being able to shirk responsibility, concealing political failure on the part of local decision-makers. There are sadly far too many negative examples of this.

4. We must prioritise business and trade – for the good of both sides.

The driver of all development is the private sector. The progress made by the People’s Republic of China over the past 30 years is a very good example of this. No one will argue that Western development aid was responsible for the People’s Republic becoming the world’s second largest economic power. In Africa, too, development will only succeed by strengthening business and trade. This is something we can observe even now: after all, the above-mentioned growth figures in many African countries have much to do with the fact that more and more countries are making great efforts to enter the African market. Everything needs to move faster, however – and if factors such as sustainability and African ownership are to play a role, too, then offers have to be competitive. This means we have to stop putting ever more and ever greater shackles on Western companies when they engage in African countries. Stronger engagement by German companies in Africa would in principle be welcomed, but originally well-intentioned legal requirements might actually impede this expansion. It is alarming to see that in the wake of the adoption of the German Act on Corporate Due Diligence Obligations in Supply Chains (which now has an even stricter European counterpart), many German and European companies are considering withdrawing from the African market.¹¹ For example, Strabag announced at the end of last year that it would no longer be participating in tenders in Africa due to the requirements of the Supply Chain Act.¹² If German and European companies withdraw and the commissions in question go to Chinese, Turkish or other companies that do not (have to) comply in any way with the requirements of the Supply Chain Act, nothing will have been achieved.

As such, breaking out of a logic geared solely towards aid should also go hand in hand with

development cooperation funds being linked much more strongly and specifically to private sector initiatives. Development cooperation that promotes the engagement of German companies in Africa can unleash immense leverage and achieve many times the intended impact – especially with regard to key aspects such as industrialisation, innovation and employment. The previous German government already launched several initiatives in this context – including the Compact with Africa, the Marshall Plan with Africa and others. Nonetheless, the logic of aid continued to dominate these initiatives, too: there was still no clear rule that business and trade should take precedence. This is now imperative, however, not least because of the competition with other players.

This is also in line with how many local partners see their own position. “We need trade, not aid!” is a regular demand in discussions with European players. In view of this, German policy should also respond much more than it has done so far to the demands of various business associations. Numerous statements calling for German development aid funds to be used to support German investment in Africa have recently been made by the Federation of German Industries (BDI), the German-African Business Association (AV) and the Mechanical Engineering Industry Association (VDMA), as well as by less obviously business-friendly actors such as the German Africa Foundation.¹³ If the goal of development cooperation is to fight poverty and generate prosperity, this kind of cooperation is the most promising way to achieve it. If German companies also profit in the process, that should not scare us: it just has to be ensured that both sides benefit.

As part of this process, German businesses have to adopt a new mindset, too. Up to now, Africa has tended to be seen as a supplier of (unprocessed) raw materials. Yet our common interest must be to enable value creation in the partner countries, too. Similar to the situation in China in the 1980s and 1990s, German and European companies must be prepared to facilitate technology transfer to Africa. There is still a long way to go here, as shown by the fact that less than 2 per cent of Germany’s global

direct investment goes to Sub-Saharan Africa (with South Africa accounting for 70 per cent of this amount). Incentives, knock-on financing and risk coverage are needed here – and these should be allowed to come through development cooperation as well. The issue of infrastructure financing, which was neglected by the West for many years – and then taken on by China – should also be assigned a much more important role.¹⁴

Moreover, the issue of financing should be put on the agenda for joint projects. African actors currently have a much worse credit rating than Europeans, for example. This means that investments are significantly more expensive per se for Africans than they are for Europeans. Joint projects should benefit both sides in this context. And the agricultural sector must not be overlooked: the supply crisis resulting from the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine has clearly demonstrated the great dependence of the poorest states in Africa in particular on food supplies from Ukraine and/or Russia (up to 80 per cent). In view of the fact that 60 per cent of the potential agricultural land in Africa is as yet unused, this area should also be given much greater consideration in German policy. The main aim should be to build up and strengthen an industrial agricultural economy. Germany has a great deal to offer here – from basic advice to modern “smart farming”.

On a positive note with regard to German development cooperation, Germany is by far the largest national supporter of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). If successful, this project will also greatly increase the chances of success for German companies that wish to get involved in Africa.

Last but not least, we must also make sure that projects supported with German tax money out of good intentions are not implemented by actors who directly compete with us. It is not very helpful that Chinese companies have regularly won German development cooperation tenders in Africa in the past: it means that German taxpayers’ money is used to implement “Chinese” projects that hardly meet the standards of

sustainability and transparency that Germany usually upholds.¹⁵

5. We must see development cooperation as a cross-cutting task dedicated to coherent strategic foreign action.

Germany is now alone among the OECD countries in having a separate ministry for development cooperation. There are good arguments against this institutional separation. Nonetheless, abolishing the BMZ is neither absolutely necessary for the required reorientation, nor would it automatically bring about the hoped-for improvements. Coherence is not only a question of institutional structures; in fact, it is more a matter of networking and coordination and therefore ultimately of political leadership. If we see development cooperation in Africa as a strategic element of German foreign action, close dovetailing with other sectors and ministries is indispensable. In view of Germany's geostrategic, economic and security interests, coordination with the Federal Foreign Office and, beyond that, with the Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action (BMWK) and the Ministry of Defence is required here as a central function. Responsibility for a coherent strategic approach on the African continent ultimately lies with the German Chancellery, however, which must be the primary source of impetus here. Various actors in the German Africa scene are now calling for the position of a "Business in Africa" coordinator to be established at the Chancellery. Most recently, the VDMA called for a Minister of State or Parliamentary Secretary of State at the BMWK to be entrusted with coordinating the federal government's activities in Africa.¹⁶ However, it would be preferable for this position to be integrated into the Chancellery, which is where a coordinator post of this kind should be based.

Coherence does not mean excessive uniformity and monopolisation. The German pluralistic approach to development cooperation may have significant weaknesses, especially with regard to departmental coordination and the consistent strategic orientation of state actors. Yet this very approach offers additional opportunities that we

should continue to make the most of. It is also important to systematically include the various channels beyond bilateral governmental and economic cooperation, including the well-developed networks maintained by aid agencies and political foundations and the local expertise that is pooled within them. These channels and networks are particularly crucial when it comes to accessing diverse local actors that are so important with regard to the subsidiarity principle explained above. One key issue is the strengthening of development-oriented and pro-democracy forces in African countries (civil society organisations, media, political parties or trade unions). The pluralistic approach offers opportunities to do better justice to the contradictory realities in Africa and to implement long-term positive measures, also in a way that is detached from current political constraints and dynamics.

Conclusion

We have to be aware that Germany's economic success forms the basis for our ability to provide offers of development cooperation to African partners and to propose collaborative ventures that are attractive to both sides. The funds used by Germany for development cooperation must also be effective in terms of the economic interests of both sides. The key initiatives must always come from the partner countries themselves. What development cooperation really can do, however, is to provide knock-on assistance – and this is what German development cooperation, too, should focus on.

– translated from German –

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