

LEARNING FROM GERMANY'S CIVIL ENGAGEMENT IN AFGHANISTAN

Given the large number of crises and conflicts worldwide, it is important to learn from past and current engagements in fragile contexts in order to make positive results replicable and avoid mistakes. The findings of the joint ministerial evaluation of the German government's civil engagement in Afghanistan¹ demonstrate what can be learned from this engagement, which was unprecedented both financially and in terms of human resources. These lessons can be applied in future operations in highly fragile contexts affected by violent conflict.

Building a peaceful and democratic Afghanistan failed, people's lives were at times improved

Between 2013 and 2021, Germany's civil engagement in Afghanistan totalled 3.5 billion euros. This made Germany the second-largest bilateral donor after the USA. The Federal Foreign Office (AA) and the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) each provided around 49 per cent of the funding, while the Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community (BMI) provided just under two per cent. The geographic focus of the engagement was on the north of Afghanistan and in the capital Kabul. The AA was involved primarily through the Stability Pact for Afghanistan and humanitarian assistance. The BMZ was involved chiefly in the sectors of good governance, economic development, education, energy and water, and the BMI in police rebuilding.

Germany's civil engagement at times demonstrably helped to improve the lives of the Afghan population. In the key geographic areas, the delivery of water, energy, education and health to Afghans was successfully improved. However, no significant contributions were made to the sustainable development of a constitutional democracy based on the rule of law, or market economy structures. Despite the considerable resources deployed, the ministries and international partners failed to achieve their goal of building a peaceful and democratic Afghanistan.

Lessons: realistic goals, strategic capacity, dealing with negative effects, learning

Realistically assess capacity: Due to foreign and domestic policy requirements – loyalty to the NATO Alliance and the need to justify the military operation through civilian efforts – the German government set itself overambitious political goals for its civil engagement in Afghanistan. During the engagement, the ministries did not adequately adapt these goals to the political realities in Afghanistan, despite the visible lack of progress. Despite the increasingly evident dominance of clientelist power structures, a lack of ownership and the elites' unwillingness to reform, the ministries failed – in retrospect – to address these points. **For future engagements in highly fragile contexts² the evaluation therefore recommends that ministries should** (1) realistically assess their own capacity in terms of their resources and the limits of their influence in the specific context, and formulate or adapt objectives accordingly; (2) define minimum requirements for the deployment of various instruments and select these in a context-appropriate manner.

Strengthen strategic capacity across the ministries: At no point in the entire evaluation period did the AA, BMI and BMZ have a joint strategy setting out how the political goals were to be achieved, which assumptions would guide action and what a scenario for ending (parts of) the engagement might look like. Moreover, the ministries worked independently of, and sometimes in competition with, each other, especially in the area of stabilisation. Coordination platforms such as the meeting of state secretaries, which could have provided space for a critical discussion of the engagement, were largely used only for information sharing. **For future engagements, especially in highly fragile contexts, the evaluation therefore recommends** (3) developing a joint ministerial strategy agreed between the ministries, with ministry-specific

¹ The joint ministerial evaluation was carried out by a working group comprising DEval, the German Police University (DHPol) and a consortium led by GFA Consulting Group GmbH. The evaluation period was limited to the period 2013 to 2021.

² The evaluation of Germany's civil engagement permits initial conclusions and recommendations for engagements in other highly fragile and conflict-ridden contexts such as Afghanistan. Some of these recommendations may also be relevant to other contexts, however.

strategies embedded in it; the former should lay out German interests, verifiable strategic and operational goals, and underlying assumptions; (4) setting up an advisory and coordination body to work across the ministries for joint ministerial management of engagements in highly complex crisis contexts; this body should be authorised to issue directives.

Systematically consider negative effects: Unintended negative effects of interventions can undermine the results of civil engagement. In the case of Afghanistan, for example, it is plausible that state structures tended to be strengthened by the inflow of funds. These structures included strong patronage networks of bureaucrats, militia leaders and entrepreneurs, which constrained development. This effect was not given sufficient consideration in either the German or the international engagement, especially at a strategic level. **For future engagements, especially in highly fragile contexts, the evaluation therefore recommends** (5) systematically examining possible unintended negative effects at an early stage – at the level of individual projects as well as the overall engagement – and taking strategic steps to counteract these effects.

Literature

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The German Institute for Development Evaluation (DEval) is mandated by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) to independently analyse and assess German development interventions. Evaluation reports contribute to the transparency of development results and provide policy-makers with evidence and lessons learned, based on which they can shape and improve their development policies.

Capitalising on knowledge: The AA, BMI and BMZ drew only a limited number of actionable conclusions from the growing knowledge that the engagement was not very effective and probably even contributed to negative developments. The ministries did endeavour to learn; the BMZ in particular conducted learning and evaluation activities. However, given the domestic and foreign policy constraints, and obstacles created by organisational culture (e.g. an insufficiently developed learning culture), there were no incentives to adapt actions accordingly or to end parts of the engagement. **For future engagements the evaluation therefore recommends** (6) measuring results not primarily in terms of outputs generated or funds disbursed, but rather in terms of the intended effects actually achieved; (7) significantly improving the learning culture in the ministries.

In future, all actors in the Bundestag and in the wider political arena should also allow a more critical and more error-tolerant debate on the successes and failures of Germany's international engagements – especially in highly fragile contexts – in order to enable more effective learning.