



INTERMINISTERIAL STRATEGIC EVALUATION OF GERMAN FEDERAL GOVERNMENT'S CIVIL ENGAGEMENT IN AFGHANISTAN

*Report on the German Federal Ministry for
Economic Cooperation and Development's
engagement in Afghanistan*

Executive Summary

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Authors

Mojib Rahman Atal
Helena Berchtold
Christoph Hartmann
Matthew Kellogg
Helge Roxin
Maren Weeger
Prof. Dr Christoph Zürcher

Responsible team leaders

Christoph Hartmann/Helge Roxin

Responsible head of department

Dr Stefan Leiderer

Design and Layout

Katharina Mayer
Zlatka Dimitrova

Editing

Marcus Klein, PhD, Bonn
Dr Susanne Reiff, Königswinter

Translation

Dr John Cochrane

Photo credits

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German Institute
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Fritz-Schäffer-Straße 26
53113 Bonn, Germany

Phone: +49 (0)228 33 69 07-0
E-mail: info@DEval.org
www.DEval.org

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

August 2021 witnessed dramatic images of the withdrawal of the international forces and seizure of power by the Taliban. These demonstrated once and for all that the international engagement to build a democratic and peaceful Afghanistan over the previous 20 years had not succeeded.

Alongside the military response to the terrorist attacks in the USA on 11 September 2001, it was envisaged that civil engagement in particular would lay the foundations for establishing Afghanistan as a peaceful member of the international community of states. It was also to be made as democratic as possible. This civil engagement in Afghanistan was supported by a large number of international actors. During the evaluation period from 2013 to 2021, Germany provided the second-largest share of bilateral funding.

The decision to conduct the joint ministerial evaluation was already taken in early 2021, prior to the collapse of the Afghan government. The evaluation is confined to the three ministries that played a key role in Germany's civil engagement in Afghanistan: the Federal Foreign Office (AA), the Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community (BMI) and the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). Alongside the joint report, three ministry-specific reports were also drawn up. This report presents the findings of the evaluation of the BMZ's engagement.

The main objective of the evaluation was to independently and comprehensively analyse and assess the German federal government's civil engagement in Afghanistan from 2013 to 2021. This was designed to generate insights for future civil engagement by Germany in highly fragile contexts affected by violent conflict. Accordingly, the evaluation is designed primarily for use at the political and strategic level by the three ministries – the AA, BMI and BMZ – and by the German Bundestag.

The evaluation took place concurrently with two further German review processes on Afghanistan. These were: (1) the Bundestag's Study Commission set up in 2022 on "Lessons learned from Afghanistan for Germany's future networked engagement" and (2) the Bundestag's Committee of Inquiry on Afghanistan.

Approach of the evaluation

Evaluation criteria: Germany's civil engagement in Afghanistan was assessed in relation to the evaluation criteria of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). These are:

- **Relevance:** Did the German federal government do the right thing in Afghanistan?
- **Coherence:** Did the ministries act coherently, synergically and on a coordinated basis within and across the ministries, as well as nationally and internationally?
- **Effectiveness and impact:** Was Germany's civil engagement in Afghanistan effective, and did it achieve impact?
- **Sustainability/connectedness¹:** Was Germany's civil engagement in Afghanistan sustainable and connected?
- **Efficiency:** Was Germany's civil engagement in Afghanistan efficient?

¹ For humanitarian aid and short-term stabilization measures conducted in crisis situations, there is an international consensus that the sustainability criterion's requirement that measures generate long-lasting effects is too high. In such cases, the "connectedness" criterion may be applied (OECD/DAC Working Party on Aid Evaluation 1999, 22, ODI 2006, 10; Kocks et al. 2018, 43). Connectedness in this sense refers to the requirement to ensure that short-term activities designed to address emergencies are carried out within a framework that considers longer-term and interconnected challenges (ODI 2006, 20). The criterion of "Anschlussfähigkeit" as applied by the Federal Foreign Office to its measures carried out in crisis prevention/stabilization/post-conflict rehabilitation corresponds to this requirement in principle, but with the important qualification that the connection of such measures to measures of other actors which ensure sustainability is not considered mandatory, but merely preferable. The challenges which this presents are described in detail in chapter 8 of the joint ministerial report.

Three levels of analysis were examined: the political decision-making level, the strategic level of the respective ministries and the operational level of the implementing organisations.

Theory-based approach: The evaluation pursued a theory-based approach. To provide a transparent, theoretical benchmark for the investigation, the evaluation reconstructed the Theory of Change implicitly underlying the engagement. It did so using existing strategy-related documents, and with the support of involved actors from the ministries concerned. This first of all enabled the evaluation team to understand the political goals of the engagement, and analyse these in the light of actual contextual developments. Secondly, it was designed to document ministry-specific Theories of Change and explain the underlying assumptions as precisely as possible.

The following data sources were used for the evaluation: (1) relevant scientific literature and (meta-) evaluations; (2) ministerial portfolio data and strategy-based documents, plus programme reports, evaluations and impact studies; (3) strategies and other documents of the Afghan government; (4) specific databases such as the Survey of the Afghan People, which elicited the perceptions and views of the Afghan population on various topics over time. Furthermore, (5) numerous semi-structured interviews were conducted with various stakeholder groups.

Limitations of the evaluation: For many areas of Germany's civil engagement, either no data on effectiveness and impact is available, or where it is available, it is qualitatively inadequate. Data collection in Afghanistan was not possible for security reasons, and might have been instrumentalised by the Taliban. This entailed limitations, particularly as regards measuring impact. These are made clear at the relevant points and offset as far as possible by considering the plausibility of assumptions. In many cases, though, knowledge holders were located outside of Afghanistan, hence it was possible to interview them.

Germany's civil engagement in Afghanistan

Goals of the German government and the BMZ

The objective of Germany's civil engagement, as agreed with the international community, was the establishment of a constitutional democracy. The government of that state would have a monopoly on the use of force, and its representatives would enjoy the trust and confidence of the people. It was envisaged that this would enable Afghanistan's long-term peaceful development, and offer prospects for a future beyond poverty, displacement, migration and extremism. The German government, and the BMZ in particular, wished to help achieve this objective. Furthermore, the BMZ's engagement was also designed to improve the lives of the Afghan population in the north of the country and in Kabul. One focus here was on the empowerment of women and girls.

The BMZ's Afghanistan portfolio

In the evaluation period from 2013 to 2021, the BMZ spent around 1.725 billion euros, and 213 projects were implemented on the ministry's behalf. The majority of the BMZ's funding (41%) went to the good governance, rule of law and human rights sector. Seventy per cent of these funds were channelled through the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF). The portfolio also comprised the sectors of sustainable economic development (13%), education (13%), water (7%) and energy (11%). However, this sectoral breakdown provides only a rough overview. This is because projects from other sectors were also subsumed under the area of good governance, for example.

Most of the funds spent by the BMZ during the evaluation period (94% – a total of more than 1.6 billion euros) went to official implementing or intermediary organisations. The focus of Germany's civil engagement was in northern Afghanistan. There was also an additional focus on provinces with major urban centres, including Balkh and Kunduz, and on the city of Herat.

Findings of the evaluation with respect to the engagement of the BMZ

In retrospect, it is to be noted the political goals agreed with the international community – above all the establishment of sustainable state and economic structures – were not achieved. Given the extraordinarily

challenging context in Afghanistan, this would probably not have been possible within a foreseeable time frame, even if the Taliban had not seized power in August 2021.

Although these broader goals were not achieved, the BMZ did make important contributions towards improving the living conditions of the Afghan people, especially in the north of the country. The BMZ thus had a positive effect on the lives of a generation of Afghans in these areas.

Constitutive framework

The Afghan context before 2001, and the international engagement from 2001 until the beginning of the evaluation period in 2013, display several determining factors which, in retrospect, severely hampered the success of civil engagement from 2013 onwards. These include above all (1) the low level of state penetration in Afghanistan; (2) the attempt to develop the state structures, which barely existed, along Western lines; (3) the lack of value creation within Afghanistan; (4) the economic dependence on the outside world (rentier state), and (5) the ongoing violent conflicts against the backdrop of the lack of an internal peace process within Afghanistan.

Relevance

By pursuing the goals of comprehensive state and economic development in Afghanistan, the BMZ, like the rest of the German government, underestimated the contextual conditions in Afghanistan and overestimated its own political room for manoeuvre. The German government acted in harmony with the international community, and was one of the most important supporters of the Afghan government. However, the German government and the BMZ also adopted the assumptions of the international players. They assumed that Afghanistan needed state-building from outside, and that this could be achieved relatively quickly within the agreed international framework.

Seen in retrospect, the goals were overambitious and unrealistic. It was not possible to achieve them with the Afghan elites, who represented particular interests. Despite the growing awareness of this problem, possible alternatives were not seriously pursued, and the German government maintained its close cooperation with the Afghan government partners. Within this framework, the BMZ made only sporadic adjustments during the period under review, without changing the fundamental goals.

Coherence

The BMZ's engagement in Afghanistan was marked by insufficient coherence both internally and externally. Some of the reasons for this were beyond the ministry's scope of action, despite considerable efforts to improve.

The greatest challenges for coherent action by the BMZ were the large number of international partners who agreed only on the broad goals; working in an insecure environment marked by military action, and working with Afghan partners who were at odds with one another. Although the BMZ always based its activities on international agreements, these were not sufficient to ensure coherence with the ministry's partners and other donors. The lack of a joint German strategy for Afghanistan further hindered the learning process and strategic adjustments that would have been necessary.

Effectiveness and impact

The BMZ made important contributions towards improving basic services for the Afghan population, particularly in the north of the country and in Kabul. This also affected women and girls in particular. Furthermore, changes were achieved at an individual level for sections of the target groups. The relevant project components were often effective. Together with other international and German civilian actors, the BMZ has thus had a positive effect on the lives of many Afghans over the past 20 years and has achieved the corresponding impact goals at the level of individuals to some extent.

However, the German government, including the BMZ, barely succeeded at all in initiating structural changes. Project components designed to structurally strengthen the systems of administration and governance, and economic frameworks, were effective only to a limited extent. Similarly, successes in the large-scale capacity development of individual administrative and government employees, and the

selective contributions also made by the BMZ to the implementation of reforms, did not lead to a structural strengthening of these systems.

The internationally agreed goal of establishing a constitutional democracy, in which the government has a monopoly on the use of force and its representatives are accepted as legitimate, was thus not achieved. The corresponding BMZ objectives at the impact level - strengthening constitutional governance and trust in and satisfaction with state institutions at national and sub-national level - were not achieved.

Cross-cutting issues, strategic management and risk management

Cross-cutting issues were only partially systematically pursued by the BMZ as part of Germany's civil engagement in Afghanistan during the evaluation period. The empowerment of women and girls, and conflict sensitivity, were strategically defined as themes, but were not integrated into all projects. Other relevant themes, such as the inclusion of marginalised groups, were not given sufficient consideration at either strategic or operational level. This was due to a lack of strategic guidelines, the absence of standardised approaches and the insufficient use of fundamentally suitable instruments, amongst other things.

Compared to the other ministries, the BMZ portfolio displayed a relatively good impact-orientation with regard to planning. However, monitoring often remained output-orientated. In the area of evaluation, the advanced institutionalisation of evaluation compared to the other ministries helped enable the use of innovative instruments at a strategic level. However, the quality of project evaluations varied greatly.

Like the other two ministries involved in Germany's civil engagement, the BMZ successfully managed security risks. However, many other risks that arose due to factors in the institutional, political and social contexts were not adequately addressed. As a result, the BMZ and implementing organisations were able to implement projects despite the challenging working conditions. However, their effectiveness, impact and sustainability were adversely affected for instance by a lack of partner ownership, corruption and patronage networks.

Unintended negative effects

Unintended negative effects are well documented for the international civil engagement in Afghanistan. As there are hardly any studies on the negative effects of Germany's civil activities, the evaluation based its findings primarily on the evidence on international engagement as a whole. It can be plausibly assumed that German development cooperation (like Germany's engagement as a whole) also contributed to the following negative effects: (1) The rentier state with pronounced patronage networks was strengthened. (2) Corruption was promoted. (3) The Taliban were indirectly supported with resources, and indirectly legitimised. (4) Competition between ethnic networks was exacerbated, thus increasing the potential for conflict. (5) Socially conservative counter-movements were strengthened.

The BMZ and the other German and international actors did too little to address negative effects. These were also the result of a dilemma inherent in civil measures in the Afghan context: as is clear in retrospect, it was not possible to deliver large volumes of funding without significantly financing traditional patronage networks, and promoting the rentier state.

Sustainability

The conditions in Afghanistan made it extremely difficult to ensure sustainable results. Weak partner capacities and ownership were an obstacle to the desired handover of interventions to Afghan institutions. This made it unlikely that sustainable results could be achieved in the foreseeable future without continuous support and capacity substitution by international donors. Neither the BMZ nor the international community found any solutions to these challenges.

The assessment of the sustainability of results at the point in time before the Taliban seized power is as follows. It could be assumed that the supported infrastructure would continue to exist and be used after the end of the intervention, even though maintenance was often not guaranteed. On the other hand, it was unlikely that the strengthening of the structures (which was in any case only selective) would be

sustainable, given the ongoing dependence on international support. It is plausible that the results achieved in the area of basic services and individual capacity development will be maintained.

It was not possible to assess conclusively the sustainability of the results for the point in time after the Taliban took power. However, there are indications that infrastructure and individual administrative structures continue to be utilised under the Taliban regime, albeit not necessarily in line with the original purpose. Results in the area of basic services and individual capacity development have also been sustained to a certain extent. However, the Taliban regime is restricting the sustainability of many of the results that were achieved, particularly for girls and women.

Efficiency

Given the difficult context, the international setting and the high domestic political expectations, the costs of the German government's civil engagement (including that of the BMZ) in Afghanistan were very high – both overall and in relation to the individual inputs delivered. Seen in retrospect, the limited effectiveness and impact of the interventions, combined with extraordinarily high costs, suggest that the efficiency of the engagement should be viewed in a critical light. Ultimately, however, given the ambitious goals of state and economic development in Afghanistan, not even this high use of resources was sufficient.

At the same time, there are strong indications that Afghan actors and structures were unable to absorb the large volume of funds delivered. This meant a dilemma for the German government, including the BMZ, as regards the continuation of the engagement in Afghanistan. A full assessment from an efficiency perspective is the responsibility of political actors, especially the German Bundestag and the wider public, because this can only be done by appropriately weighing up all the political costs of the engagement (in terms of domestic, security, foreign and development policy) against the effectiveness and impact.

General conclusion

The German civil engagement helped to improve the lives of the Afghan population, particularly in the north of the country and in Kabul. For over 20 years, the lives of the Afghan people in these regions were positively affected. Only in the medium term will it be possible to determine more precisely whether and to what extent these improvements have also had a lasting effect on social structures, or whether this engagement was merely an episode in Afghanistan's crisis-ridden recent history.

During the evaluation period, Germany and the international community clearly failed to achieve their goals of establishing a democratically legitimised constitutional state, and sustainable economic and state structures. Given the context, the goals were too ambitious, and were based on the false assumption that the desired changes could be achieved from the outside and without a sufficient congruence of interests with Afghanistan's elites. The international community underestimated the challenges and constraints of international action, and overestimated its scope of influence vis-à-vis an Afghan ruling class that was primarily concerned with safeguarding regionally segregated and clientelist interests (Conclusion 1). Under these conditions, it was barely possible to harness the strengths of the instruments of bilateral Technical and Financial Cooperation (TC and FC) (Conclusion 2). Despite these contextual conditions, however, the BMZ adapted its engagement to a limited extent at best (Conclusion 3). Even the innovations with regard to monitoring and learning did little to change this (Conclusion 4). Moreover, the risks of potential negative effects were not given sufficient consideration (Conclusion 5).

The engagement in Afghanistan brought with it dilemmas that could not be resolved by the BMZ alone. One example of this is the involvement of former warlords in the government, which the USA and subsequently the international community considered necessary. This damaged the legitimacy of the young democracy and the population's trust in the Afghan state. Another dilemma was the need to work with state actors in order to achieve the broader goals, even though their limited ownership of the new state and their firm roots in illiberal and clientelist networks were well known.

That said, this failure to achieve the broader goals does not mean that all chosen courses of action and instruments failed in equal measure. Crises are context-dependent and it is therefore necessary to analyse precisely which instrument is suitable for the crisis in question, or consider which adjustments would be appropriate to adapt to the respective context. Above all, there is a need for continuous a priori assessments and learning processes about what can be achieved with the instruments of development cooperation, in which context and under what preconditions.² An evidence-based, continuous process of learning and adaptation of this kind did not take place to a sufficient extent as part of the engagement in Afghanistan. Better use should be made of such processes when operating in other highly fragile states affected by violent conflict.

² To read more about context-robust-strategies in fragile contexts, see Faust et al. (2023).

BMZ-specific conclusions

Conclusion 1: The BMZ (like the German government and the international community as a whole) misjudged the challenges for its engagement in Afghanistan, as well as its own capacity for achieving its overarching goals. The political goals were overambitious, and the theoretical assumptions for Germany's civil engagement did not match the reality.

The BMZ (like the German government and the international community as a whole) underestimated the complex societal and socio-cultural challenges faced by Afghanistan. At the same time, it overestimated its capacity to help deliver structural solutions to the regional and national problems in Afghanistan through civil engagement. Having set its course early on, the German government – together with the international community – remained committed to the goals defined in 2001 until the very end. Accordingly, the BMZ only cautiously adapted its 2014 country strategy over time; there was no impetus whatsoever for a fundamental change to the mandate and its goals. Right until the end, this left the German (and other international) actors dependent on the cooperation of the Afghan government and the elites they supported, who were almost entirely unaccountable to their own citizens.

The political goals were overambitious and all external actors, including the German government (and thus the BMZ), were under considerable political pressure to succeed. The German government's engagement in Afghanistan was driven primarily by its loyalty to the USA and its obligation to provide assistance as a member of the NATO alliance, and the view that the security of the Western world would also be defended in Afghanistan. It followed the international military operation, without which it would not have been possible in this form. From the outset Germany's civil engagement in general, and the BMZ's development engagement in particular, were under considerable domestic political pressure to create a positive counternarrative in response to the widespread scepticism in Germany towards the military operation. The German government's expansion of this civil engagement, particularly after 2010/2011, involved ambitious goals that could not realistically be achieved. Many operational managers also increasingly recognised this in the years that followed.

Assumptions underlying the strategy did not match the reality. Even effective projects had little effect on the impact goals. Germany's civil engagement was based on an assumption that was shared internationally, but in retrospect proved incorrect. It was assumed that the development of constitutional democracy, a modern society and a modern economic system could be enabled from outside. This assumption that state and society in Afghanistan could be shaped primarily by the international community was in turn based on the false assumption that the interests of the international actors and those of the Afghan elites converged. Afghanistan's political elites not only lacked the requisite technical and organisational capacities. Above all, they represented particular interests that were oriented less towards building a constitutional democracy and more towards enriching specific groups. Consequently, they were virtually unaccountable, and only implemented the programmes and reforms agreed with the international community to the extent that this served to protect their own interests. Some positive project results were achieved, chiefly in the area of basic services. Nonetheless, it had been assumed that supporting the capacity development of state actors and improving livelihoods (together with other civil interventions) would lead to a sufficient increase in the legitimacy of the government and the administration (the German government's impact goal). This assumption did not materialise.

Cooperation with corrupt elites and in some cases also with former violent actors jeopardised Germany's civil engagement and thus the achievement of the goals defined by the BMZ. Particularly the involvement of former violent actors with no substantial interest in reform contributed to the delegitimisation of the government in the eyes of the Afghan population. This undermined the efforts of international donors to create a legitimate constitutional state. The German government (and the international community) nevertheless decided to take this step, which also meant excluding other political actors. This was the main reason why the planned and necessary transitional justice did not materialise by the end of the period under review. Those responsible at the time considered this necessary in order to avoid the risk of civil war breaking out again.

Over the years, the relationship between the international community and the supported Afghan elites, who were mostly averse to reform, became one of increasing interdependence. This prevented the firm establishment of an independent constitutional Afghan state. At the same time, the international engagement was continued primarily in order not to completely abandon the results that had been achieved, which were at best moderate. The major dysfunctionality of the Afghan state after 2001, combined with the effects of sustained massive military interventions that severely impacted the civilian population, was a major cause of the Taliban's resurgence. This exacerbated the security situation increasingly, and was a salient feature of the evaluation period.

Conclusion 2: Another reason why the overambitious political goals of the BMZ (and the German government as a whole) were not achieved was the decision to deploy the instruments of bilateral Technical and Financial Cooperation. In the conflict-ridden Afghan context, it was virtually impossible to utilise their strengths. At the same time, under these difficult conditions, it was at least possible to substantially improve the provision of basic services to the population in the intervention areas.

The decision to select primarily the BMZ's operational instruments, especially those of bilateral TC and FC, meant that priority was attached to supporting the capacity development of government institutions and state administrative structures. This was plausible from a development policy perspective. The BMZ rightly emphasised the crucial role of legitimate state institutions in overcoming fragility and cycles of violence.³ Especially against the background of the politically set goals, the long-term use of the instruments of bilateral TC and FC for Afghanistan therefore made sense.

However, in the highly fragile context characterised by pronounced and persistent violent confrontations, it was virtually impossible to harness the strengths of the instruments of TC and FC⁴ According to the German government's guidelines on "Preventing Crises, Resolving Conflicts, Building Peace", Afghanistan can be described as a "failing state" (the highest category of fragility). Such states are defined as "dysfunctional states suffering from significant weaknesses in all dimensions, frequently characterised by violent conflicts to the point of civil wars" (German government, 2017).

In Afghanistan, economic, social and political behaviour is shaped by informal and geographically fragmented institutions that largely contrast with the formal rules of the state (see Chapter 4). During the evaluation period, the interests of Afghan government actors were aligned primarily with specific patronage systems, which were often fragmented along geographic and ethnic lines. Efforts to strengthen the government remained ineffective, and attempts to encourage Afghan actors to take responsibility for implementing reform programmes largely came to nothing. As a result, the Afghan government was only formally and ostensibly willing to engage in dialogue. Its actions were essentially determined by the structures described above, which hindered reforms. With the instruments available, Germany's civil engagement therefore could not have been expected to crucially affect institutional realities such as patron-client relationships and limited state accountability. It is also argued in the research literature that the emergence of accountable institutions is dependent on enabling political frameworks – such as comprehensive elite settlements, that it requires the precise and realistic adaptation of programmes, and that it often takes many decades. Today, the BMZ also concludes that in a case like Afghanistan, "state-building projects" cannot be implemented (BMZ, no date b).

³ The OECD Principles for Good International Engagement in Fragile States and Situations (OECD, 2007) recommend focusing on state-building as the central objective in highly fragile contexts.

⁴ There is no standardised definition of fragility, nor is there a consensus among researchers on how different degrees of fragility can be measured. In general, however, fragile states can be assumed to lack basic functions in the areas of security, the rule of law and basic social services. As explained in Chapter 4 on the constitutive framework, and as can be seen on all common fragility indices, Afghanistan almost always ranks bottom (see e.g. the "List of Fragile and Conflict-affected Situations" (World Bank, 2023) or the "Fragile States Index 2019" (FFP, 2019). The increase in violent conflicts and the deteriorating security situation during the evaluation period meant that the foundation for bilateral TC and FC was lost once and for all.

Nonetheless, the BMZ maintained the narrative that Afghanistan was largely a "normal" developing country. The country was considered a bilateral development partner until the end (and was not even categorised as a nexus and peace partner when the "BMZ 2030" reform strategy was introduced in 2020). In retrospect, the adherence to the instruments of bilateral TC and FC which this entailed proved to be inappropriate. Ultimately, work continued until 2021 using an approach that could not have been effective due to the lack of basic preconditions, including a minimum level of security and ownership. In Afghanistan's context of high fragility and violent conflict, the overly ambitious structure-building goals were virtually unachievable. In retrospect, the question therefore arises of whether it would have been more appropriate and efficient to focus on the goal of improving living conditions, and to prioritise the use of instruments such as crisis management and reconstruction, infrastructure and transitional development assistance (*KWI/ÜH*). This would also have been formally in line with the BMZ's approach to such a fragile country, which is based on the German government's Guidelines on Preventing Crises, Resolving Conflicts, Building Peace (BMZ, no date b; German government, 2017).

Conclusion 3: The BMZ (like the other ministries involved in Germany's civil engagement) did not sufficiently adapt the strategic goals of its engagement in Afghanistan in response to the lack of success. The politically set goals and institutional obstacles to learning precluded the BMZ utilising existing (often even self-generated) knowledge in order to realistically adjust its strategic goals.

During the period under review, particularly as compared with the other ministries involved in Germany's civil engagement, the BMZ invested extensively in learning formats and involved external independent expertise in strategic planning processes.⁵ This testifies to the BMZ's basic willingness to manage its portfolio based on evidence.

Although the increasingly negative evidence did lead to portfolio adjustments, it did not result in the BMZ fundamentally questioning its engagement at the strategic level and/or fundamentally adjusting its strategic goals. For example, at no point during the evaluation period did the German government, and thus the BMZ leadership, change the directives set at political and strategic level to deploy massive TC and FC resources, and to pursue the key objective of establishing and strengthening the state administration.

To nevertheless adapt to the contextual circumstances and above all the continuously deteriorating security situation, the BMZ's country division attempted to manage the overarching political goals flexibly at the operational level and to readjust the portfolio, at least in individual intervention areas based on the knowledge gained from the learning activities. For example, more work was carried out in safe urban areas, and new large-scale infrastructure projects were avoided.

With these adjustments, however, the challenges arising from the massive use of TC and FC resources could only be met to a limited extent. It was not possible to reconcile the increasingly obvious conflicting aims of wishing to substantially build a state on the one hand, and progressively circumvent dysfunctional state structures on the other. From today's perspective, it is therefore highly unlikely that the goals set by the international community could have been achieved within a foreseeable period using the chosen approaches. On the contrary: by supporting a corrupt and dysfunctional regime, the international engagement itself enabled the Taliban to gain strength and thus overthrow the government, which had only ostensible democratic legitimacy.

Conclusion 3 demonstrates that the existence of negative evidence alone was not sufficient to fundamentally call into question the political/strategic goals for Germany's civil engagement in Afghanistan, or to force an adjustment of the portfolio. The main reason why the goals were not adjusted was that the whole of the German government adhered to the goals adopted in 2001. This in turn prevented a more comprehensive strategic reorientation by the BMZ (as well as the other ministries).

⁵ This point is explained in more detail in Conclusion 4.

Furthermore, various factors at institutional and individual level within the BMZ (and the other ministries) hindered strategic learning and the strategic adjustments that might have resulted from it. Sufficient knowledge of the lack of results had been available since at least 2016, yet these lessons known did not prompt the ministry to fundamentally question its own actions or implement alternatives (lessons learned).

First of all, the political pressure to deliver results had an effect at all levels. Critical reporting within the ministry was thus essentially confined to stating that the security situation was becoming increasingly difficult. Secondly, the ministry's perception of itself – at least at the operational level – seemed to be such that, although it was committed to Germany's civil engagement, it did not wish to take major responsibility for the political goals. Thirdly, the ministries and the implementing organisations had systemic, vested organisational interests, such as the preservation of financial and human resources. This contributed to the fact that negative findings were not (sufficiently) incorporated into strategic learning and adjustments were not made. Fourthly, there was a lack of incentive structures at the level of individuals that would have motivated those responsible to pass critical reports up the hierarchy, in order to prompt evidence-based adjustments at a strategic and political level.

Conclusion 4: The BMZ introduced useful innovations for the Afghanistan portfolio in the areas of monitoring, evaluation and learning. However, the knowledge on effectiveness and impact produced were not given sufficient consideration in portfolio management, which remained largely output-oriented.

The BMZ used monitoring, evaluation and learning tools for its engagement in Afghanistan, such as portfolio reviews, a meta-review, the DevTracker and the North Booster Survey. In particular, the portfolio reviews conducted externally with the involvement of academics in 2013 and 2017 and the North Booster Survey enabled the BMZ to make a more empirically based assessment of its own effectiveness and impact. The findings of the reviews were incorporated into the 2014 country strategy (BMZ, 2014b) and the position paper on strengthening Afghan responsibility (BMZ, 2018). With the meta-review published in 2020, which aggregated the findings of international evaluations on the effectiveness and impact of civil interventions in Afghanistan, the BMZ supplemented not only its own canon of knowledge on development cooperation in highly fragile contexts, but also the international one. With the DevTracker, the BMZ and the AA also introduced a new monitoring tool on the initiative of the BMZ. This was designed to record for the first time the outputs of all projects implemented in Afghanistan across the ministries. Finally, since at least 2017 the BMZ has supported the idea of a cross-ministerial evaluation to be carried out by DEval. DEval had already conducted a review of the evaluation work on German development cooperation in Afghanistan in 2014 (DEval, 2014).

Due to the often inadequate impact orientation, particularly in monitoring and evaluation at project level, management continued to be primarily output-orientated (also against the background of the learning constraints outlined in Conclusion 3). Although the DevTracker was an innovative instrument and one jointly designed by the AA and BMZ, it was not used to the same extent by both ministries. While the BMZ projects were largely recorded in the DevTracker, this was not the case for the AA-funded projects. Furthermore, only outputs were recorded. This meant that the DevTracker itself could not provide any information on the aggregated impact of the engagement.

The project evaluations carried out only generated reliable findings on outcomes, impacts and unintended negative effects in a few cases. Similarly, only in a few cases were studies carried out internally within projects to review their effectiveness and impact. In particular, few indicators and in some cases no data were generated on the use of the capacity development activities implemented. These could have provided findings on the results achieved by strengthening the functionality of the administrative and governance systems. The lack of such data made not only project management more difficult, but also impact-oriented strategic management too. As a result, it was almost impossible to draw on impact data for the portfolio reviews or the present evaluation.

Conclusion 5: The BMZ (as well as the other ministries involved) did not sufficiently consider the risks of potential negative effects in its engagement in Afghanistan. In so doing it undermined its own goals.

As time went on, risks that had been inadequately considered became predicaments for both the German and the international civil engagement in Afghanistan. It is almost impossible to determine the extent of the BMZ's direct contribution to negative effects that could potentially exacerbate conflicts, not least due to the lack of evaluations.

The main potential risks that were reluctantly accepted included corruption, imported inflation, the encouragement of a rent-seeking economy, the support of clientelistic structures and the fungibility of aid or its diversion for the benefit of the Taliban and other armed and criminal groups. Under the strong pressure to disburse funds, the ministries took risks that they would have avoided under other circumstances. They supported programmes that far exceeded Afghanistan's absorption capacity.

Furthermore, some projects were implemented hastily and important quality standards were not adequately taken into account. For example, the findings of this evaluation suggest that the consideration of all cross-cutting issues posed a challenge for strategic and operational work, particularly due to the highly fragile context in Afghanistan, and was therefore not performed systematically. In a constantly changing environment, this seems understandable. However, it is all the more problematic as the risk of negative effects is significantly higher in highly fragile contexts. Besides the lack of strategic guidance from the BMZ, the main reasons for this were presumably the pressure to disburse funds and the difficult environment, in some cases exacerbated by the lack of expertise among the implementing actors.

Projects were also implemented in regions where there was little government control. This increased the risk that the Taliban would benefit directly or indirectly from the interventions.

The BMZ assumed that it would be able to minimise some risks (above all the risk of corruption) through the development cooperation interventions that were financed primarily off-budget. However, whether the delivery of aid by bypassing the public financial systems of partners can lead to the funds provided being less affected by corruption and other fiduciary risks is disputed in the literature, not least due to the problem of fungibility.⁶ For other risks, however, there were no explicit mitigation strategies, for example in relation to projects in contested geographic areas or areas controlled by the Taliban.

The following dilemmas in particular arose for both the German and the international civil engagement:

(1) Through its civil engagement the German government, including the BMZ, wanted to modernise the state, the economy and society in Afghanistan. By providing extensive financial resources, however, it potentially helped to fuel inflation and corruption in Afghanistan and to exacerbate rent-seeking by both state and non-state Afghan actors. (2) The German government, including the BMZ, wanted to cooperate as effectively as possible with influential Afghan government actors. By supporting clientelist structures among the Afghan elite, however, it potentially helped to accentuate ethnic, sectarian, tribal and other social structures, which encouraged further social and political polarisation.

These and other dilemmas were omnipresent in Afghanistan. Yet they were barely included in the rationale for strategic decisions. The resulting opportunity costs for the engagement in terms of effectiveness, impact and sustainability were insufficiently documented, reflected on and taken into account.

⁶ For a discussion of the concept of aid fungibility, see Leiderer (2012).

Recommendations and implementation guidance

The following recommendations to the BMZ are based on the above conclusions. In some cases they elaborate in further detail recommendations that were prepared for the joint ministerial report on the engagement of the AA, BMI and BMZ (see Box 1).

Box 1 Joint ministerial recommendations

As part of the joint ministerial evaluation of Germany's civilian engagement in Afghanistan, joint ministerial recommendations were also prepared. These are addressed to all three ministries involved: the AA, the BMI and the BMZ. They are listed briefly below.

Recommendation 1: The German government⁷ should base its engagement in highly fragile states affected by violent conflict more closely on positions that are jointly agreed among ministries, and regularly reviewed by them. In doing so, it should clarify, in a value-based and at the same time more interest-led manner, whether an envisaged engagement would affect Germany's fundamental foreign, security and development policy interests. If so, it should determine whether this requires action, and if so whether the necessary capacities are available for that action.

Recommendation 2: The German government should set up an advisory and coordination body to work across ministries for specific cases of crisis or conflict. In such situations, this body should identify a coherent, whole-of-government position to guide the German government's actions, and recommend this to the cabinet for a decision. Furthermore, in the event of a crisis or conflict, this body should coordinate the operational engagement of the ministries involved. If differences of opinion arise, it should be authorised to issue directives.

Recommendation 3: The German government, also incorporating the coordination structure described in Recommendation 2, should develop a joint strategy derived from the political goals (including a definition of the desired end state of the engagement). It should clearly define the responsibilities and tasks of the individual ministries, and ensure continuous coordination and adaptation of the engagement.

Recommendation 4: In civil interventions in crisis situations, the German government should substantially strengthen instruments for cross-ministerial monitoring and evaluation.

Recommendation 5: When engaging in crisis contexts, the German government should make greater use of the available evidence from monitoring, evaluations, implementation practice and scientific research to review and, if necessary, adjust overarching goals, strategies and strategic management. To this end it should also create an open and constructive learning culture.

Recommendation 6: In its strategic planning and operational implementation in highly fragile contexts affected by violent conflict, the German government should take more systematic account of potential negative effects. It should also continuously monitor their occurrence.

Specific recommendations for the BMZ

The following ministry-specific recommendations to the BMZ relate to positioning and goals (Recommendation 1); strategy development (Recommendation 2); the requirements for effective bilateral Technical and Financial Cooperation (Recommendation 3); the expansion of innovative management instruments (Recommendation 4); managing potential negative effects (Recommendation 5); intra-ministerial learning (Recommendation 6) and managing cross-cutting issues (Recommendation 7). Implementation guidance was drawn up for each recommendation.

⁷ Below, the German government is always named as the addressee of the recommendations. This primarily refers to the AA, BMI and BMZ. However, based on a networked approach, the recommendations are also relevant for other ministries.

One lesson learned from Germany's engagement in Afghanistan is that the contextual conditions – a lack of partner ownership for the new state, increasingly open conflict and a lack of physical security – made it virtually impossible to succeed in developing and establishing a constitutional democracy and functional economic structures. However, the BMZ was unable to free itself from the German government's overambitious goals. Instead, partly due to competition between ministries, the BMZ (as well as the other ministries) was incentivised to adopt an over-optimistic attitude towards unrealistic overarching goals of the German government. The responsibility for this lay primarily at the political level (both internationally and nationally).

As part of the government, however, the ministry also bears responsibility. Seen from today's perspective, the BMZ did not do enough to consistently follow through on its own lessons learned. At the very least, it should have prompted the cabinet to fundamentally rethink the engagement, or even end it if necessary. One reason for not doing so may be that the limited options for delivering effective development cooperation (including peacebuilding instruments) under conditions of violent conflict became apparent in Afghanistan.

***Recommendation 1:* The BMZ should realistically assess the limits of its own sphere of influence when operationalising political goals in highly fragile states affected by violent conflict. It should also take this assessment into account when formulating goals and designing portfolios.**

Implementation guidance

- The BMZ should make its goals and the underlying strategic assumptions explicit based on Theories of Change. This will lay the foundation for reviewing assumptions and realistically assessing the achievement of goals. The BMZ should also underpin its strategic goals with indicators at impact level. Furthermore, through continuous review it should ensure the further joint development of the engagement across the ministries.
- The BMZ should regularly review the potential for achieving its overarching goals and its strategic assumptions, and develop processes and guidelines for this purpose.
- The BMZ should adjust its goals and its portfolio design on this basis. This may mean, for instance, that it uses other instruments or reduces the portfolio size. If the BMZ's own room for manoeuvre is not sufficient to achieve the goals by making adjustments, this should be made transparent within the joint ministerial framework.
- The BMZ should pay greater attention to (implementation) risks inter alia during planning, implementation and monitoring, and tighten up the guidelines for managing risks during the various project phases.

Recommendation 2: The BMZ should formulate context-robust strategies in highly fragile countries affected by violent conflict. It should also use the available instruments more flexibly, and thus make them more goal-oriented. The BMZ should use joint ministerial analyses and strategies as a basis for this.

Implementation guidance

- The BMZ should pursue a more adaptive strategic approach in highly fragile contexts characterised by violent conflicts – instead of adhering closely to strategies based on a large number of assumptions and highly susceptible to error, as in Afghanistan. This can be achieved with the help of scenario analyses, for example, which can be used to anticipate a wide range of possible developments and formulate development policy options. In Afghanistan, the resulting greater degree of flexibility could then have paved the way for an earlier shift towards instruments such as crisis management and reconstruction, infrastructure, transitional development assistance and/or instruments of the BMZ's Special Initiative on Displacement (*Sonderinitiative Flucht*).
- If several ministries are engaged in the same geographic context, the BMZ should develop strategies together with them to achieve the German government's overarching goals. This will ensure that coherence is promoted. A joint baseline analysis of each context is crucially important here. Accordingly, the BMZ (as well as the other ministries) should prioritise coordinated cross-ministerial planning over autonomous planning by each ministry.

Recommendation 3: The BMZ should formulate minimum requirements for the use of bilateral Technical and Financial Cooperation (TC and FC) instruments in highly fragile contexts affected by violent conflict.

Implementation guidance

- The BMZ should review the basic conditions for the effective use of bilateral TC and FC on a context-specific basis. Here it is useful to differentiate between the intervention countries according to their degree of state fragility. The BMZ can draw on internal instruments such as the brief politico-economic analyses (*Politökonomischen Kurzanalysen*), but should make better use of these in future.
- The BMZ should define minimum requirements for the use of traditional development cooperation instruments. When defining these requirements it should consider the lessons briefly outlined in Box 2, which are drawn from the analysis of the engagement in Afghanistan.
- In its analysis of local institutions, in addition to the formal institutions the BMZ should also consider the underlying informal institutions more systematically. This applies in particular to those institutions that are most important for achieving political stability, and the question of which of them can be influenced by the BMZ (or the German government). This would enable the BMZ to better assess what can and cannot be changed using the various instruments, and within what time frame.

Box 2 Lessons for bilateral TC and FC in highly fragile countries

1. In violent conflicts, development cooperation itself cannot create security. Instead, it requires safe spaces in order to be effective and impactful.
1. Ownership and interests cannot be created from outside through development cooperation. Rather, elites must decide what is in their own interest and pursue a development process (elite settlements) that the BMZ is able to support.
2. In a (post-)conflict context, cooperation with former violent actors is often unavoidable. This makes accompanying measures in the areas of transitional justice and peacebuilding all the more necessary.
3. In countries where political goals are to be achieved with the support of many countries and international actors, coherent international cooperation (especially with regard to goals, deadlines and responsibilities) is a necessary condition for bilateral TC and FC.

Recommendation 4: The BMZ should further refine its strategic learning and management instruments for highly fragile contexts affected by violent conflict, building on its experience with innovative approaches during its engagement in Afghanistan.

Implementation guidance

- The BMZ should review the extent to which innovative approaches developed for its engagement in Afghanistan can and should be transferred to other highly fragile contexts, and developed further accordingly. The RMO⁸, the DevTracker, the North Booster, the meta-reviews and the new human resources instrument the "BMZ-Representatives – Northern Afghanistan" (*BMZ-Nordvertreter*innen*) in particular could be considered for this purpose. The BMZ should pay particular attention to a more impact-orientated use of instruments.

Recommendation 5: In its strategic planning and operational implementation in highly fragile contexts affected by violent conflict, the BMZ should take more systematic account of potential negative effects. It should also continuously monitor their possible occurrence.

Implementation guidance

- The BMZ and its implementation partners (implementing organisations, subcontractors and/or cooperation partners on the partner side) should anticipate risks arising from working with certain actors (such as [former] warlords). This requires a systematic review of important possible partners, as well as a documented assessment of the potential costs resulting from the cooperation (such as the delegitimation of the entire engagement). This applies in particular to the implementation of projects in areas fully or partially controlled by insurgents.
- The BMZ should develop mitigation strategies. Furthermore, where its own sphere of influence is limited, it should weigh up the potential negative effects against the expected benefits of interventions to a greater extent than in the past. It should systematically document this analysis and draw up a roadmap describing when and how interventions can or must be discontinued.
- Together with the international community, the BMZ should systematically consider the effects of its presence on the political economy of a conflict, and find proactive ways to mitigate the negative effects.
- Together with its implementing partners, the BMZ should continuously review at country portfolio and project level whether negative effects (may) arise during the implementation of the interventions. In highly fragile contexts affected by violent conflict, it should work towards ensuring that conflict sensitivity and the risk of negative effects receive more prominent coverage in evaluations of strategies and programmes. Instruments such as the brief politico-economic analyses and peace and conflict assessments should be fine-tuned and used systematically. The BMZ should take full account of the findings in strategic planning and project design.

Recommendation 6: The BMZ should strengthen an open and constructive learning culture, particularly when engaged in highly fragile contexts affected by violent conflict. When doing so, it should utilise the available evidence early on and regularly to review and, if necessary, adjust overarching goals, strategies and strategic management.

Implementation guidance

- The BMZ should strengthen the internal transfer of knowledge and assessments across hierarchical levels. It should also systematically and regularly draw on external expertise and further expand structures for systematic knowledge management.

⁸ The RMO approach has already been used in northern Iraq, for example.

- Furthermore, the BMZ should systematically and regularly make use of the knowledge of independent institutions and individuals outside the organisations involved in implementing interventions. This will enable the ministry to receive critical assessments of its strategic actions and validate them from multiple perspectives.
- The BMZ should create incentive systems and mechanisms (channels of dissent) so that knowledge in general, and criticism in particular, can be effectively expressed from the operational up to the strategic and political level. The BMZ leadership should make it clear that such analytical independence is encouraged and required, even if the findings involve criticism.

Recommendation 7: The BMZ should develop more specific guidelines for the appropriate inclusion of cross-cutting issues, now referred to as “quality criteria” (*BMZ-Qualitätsmerkmale*), in highly fragile contexts affected by violent conflict. It should do so in a way that does not constrain rapid and flexible implementation.

Implementation guidance

- The BMZ should develop specific guidelines that enable the responsible divisions to take appropriate account of cross-cutting issues, now referred to as quality criteria, as has already been commenced as part of the quality criteria strategies planned for the "BMZ 2030" strategy process. In doing so, the ministry should define adapted depths of application for incorporating quality criteria into work in fragile contexts.
- In the management process, the BMZ should review and monitor compliance with these standards beyond just assigning markers. It is especially important that gender analyses and peace and conflict assessments be carried out systematically and better integrated into the project design process.
- To ensure the cross-cutting inclusion and monitoring of quality criteria, the BMZ should adapt the module proposal and reporting templates so as to integrate the criteria more clearly.
- For these processes, the BMZ should ensure that points to consider and weightings for the inclusion of quality criteria are easy to understand.
- The BMZ should ensure that the rapid and flexible implementation of interventions required in crisis contexts is not constrained by unnecessarily complex bureaucratic processes.

This is a translation and extension of the summary of the DEval publication: "Ressortgemeinsame strategische Evaluierung des zivilen Engagements der Bundesregierung in Afghanistan. Ressortspezifischer Bericht zum Engagement des BMZ in Afghanistan". Download the full report here (available only in German):

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