

DEVELOPMENT WORKERS – AN OUTDATED INSTRUMENT FOR DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION?

Summary

Governmental and non-governmental German institutions have been assigning development workers (DWs) to the Global South for more than 50 years. Some poor countries have since become middle income countries, and are now shaping global agendas. Development aid has also changed significantly. Today, cooperation on equal terms has superseded the old donor-recipient principle. In this new context, the actors of development cooperation have developed many new forms of cooperation and instruments.

So has the DW model, which some have suggested is outdated, outlived its usefulness? A comprehensive DEval evaluation on the efficacy of the instrument in partner countries draws the opposite conclusion: In poor countries in particular, and in pockets of poverty in emerging economies, DWs remain effective to this day, and up-to-date. The key enabling conditions for the continued efficacy of this instrument for personnel development cooperation are:

- DWs base their activities on an understanding of advisory work in which they apply their technical and methodological expertise to facilitate change together with local partners on a peer-to-peer basis.
- DWs continue to apply their proven blend of professional expertise, solidarity, commitment and long-term work in partner organisations.

Notwithstanding these positive findings, the instrument ‚DW‘ faces three key challenges:

1. Overemphasising the element of volunteering, as was the case in the Leitbild-paper recently adopted by the assigning institutions, would inevitably have a negative effect on efficacy.

The Leitbild-paper emphasises volunteering and commitment, but does not go far enough in acknowledging the specific professionalism as a driver of efficacy, which is equally important.

2. The instrument can be aligned much more closely with the needs of local partners. This can be achieved by improving the appraisal of project secondments prior to the recruitment and assignment of DWs, and through more detailed communication with all the relevant partners.
3. Official development cooperation faces the challenge of reconciling the grass roots-oriented modus operandi of DWs with the core logic of programmes, and integrating it accordingly. Under current conditions, the DWs integrated into official development cooperation are unable to make exhaustive use of their greater potential for scalability and sustainability. Official German development cooperation is more ‚responsive‘ to governments than to local target groups.

Development workers in the light of new global trends in development cooperation

The Aid Effectiveness Agenda (Paris, Accra and Busan) cemented the key importance of partner country ownership in international development. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) also underline the central importance of partner actors on all levels. At the same time, differences in the pace of development between developing countries have meant that a whole range of former Least Developed Countries (LDCs) today number among the middle income countries, or in some cases are even categorised as emerging economies. It is often assumed that human capacities and potential in the Global South have grown as a result of this economic modernisation process, making a North-South transfer of human resources increasingly superfluous.

So does this mean that DWs have become obsolete, because they are based on an outdated, paternalistic model of one-sided transfer of human resources from North to South? The findings of a current DEval evaluation demonstrate that the secondment of DWs remains both relevant and effective. This becomes easy to understand when we take into account the specific way in which the instrument has been continuously developed together with partners, thus ensuring that it remains responsive to their needs. The 'modern' development worker still has in common with the traditional origins of the instrument the element of solidarity and commitment; over the last couple of decades, however, this has been supplemented by a specific professionalisation.

Historic development and specificity as an instrument of personnel development cooperation

Governmental and non-governmental German institutions have been assigning development workers (DWs) to the Global South for more than 50 years. These assignments can still be regarded as a special form of social engagement. One fundamental aspect of accepting such an assignment still involves the inherent motivation to work for the interests of local partners, while forgoing a customary salary and receiving only a maintenance allowance for doing so. This is a special feature of DWs that distinguishes them from experts who work for a salary or a fee. The special significance of DWs among German development cooperation's array of personnel-secondment instruments is also reflected by the number of DWs placed. Since the instrument was introduced, more than 28,000 DWs have been placed. Between 2005 and 2013, despite some slight downturns, an average of 1,240 DWs were assigned every year. This was equivalent to just under a quarter of all experts placed under state and non-state German development cooperation.

The peer-to-peer approach and specific professionalisation of DWs

Originally, the secondment of DWs was based primarily on a commitment to voluntary work. This has since been superseded by the spirit of professional service that has emerged. This rise in standards of professionalism has taken place chiefly on the basis

of changed needs in partner countries, which have necessitated improvements in the professional qualifications and social skill sets of DWs. Moreover, partner organisations now expect DWs to work on more equal terms with their counterparts than before.

These increased demands of partner organisations are reflected in a more precise profile for DWs as advisors. Professionalisation in this sense comprises the ability to contribute specific development cooperation expertise and methodological knowledge to work performed jointly with local partners on equal terms – for instance in municipal associations, district hospitals or civil society organisations. Core elements that are conducive to the communicative process needed to adapt knowledge to new local contexts, and are thus characteristic features of the specific professionalism of DWs, include:

- technical and methodological expertise for development cooperation
- solidarity and commitment
- an independent, external perspective
- a peer-to-peer approach
- powers of reflection and intercultural skills.

When these elements are in place, the work of DWs is particularly well received by partner organisations, which appreciate and know how to make use of this blend of technical and methodological expertise combined with solidarity and commitment.

Long-term assignments based on professional expertise, solidarity and a commitment to advocacy for local partners, reflect a vibrant understanding of partnership that continues to unfold in line with the principles of modern development cooperation. Consequently, the view taken by some that DW assignments represent an antiquated, paternalistic approach to development cooperation fails to do justice to the way the instrument is used. Looking at things from the perspective of local partners and identifying with their interests inject vitality into a form of cooperation that precludes a one-dimensional transfer of knowledge from North to South. More far-reaching proposals for transforming the DW service into a global learning service would be questionable from the point of view of efficacy, and are based on a view of the development cooperation world that sees the North and South as having already achieved the desired equal status.

DW assignments have been continuously modernised in line with partner needs, although there has not been any recognisable binding overall conceptual framework for the instrument, or even any coordinated management among the assigning institutions

to ensure the efficacy of the instrument in the Global South. As a result, today the instrument has moved beyond its orientation toward volunteering and the original understanding of the transfer of technical expertise as a one-way process.

However, two huge challenges now need to be mastered:

1. On the conceptual level, the recently adopted Leitbild-paper only partially does justice to the development outlined above. It emphasises volunteering and commitment, but does not go far enough in acknowledging the specific professionalism as a driver of efficacy. Yet it is this specific combination of professionalism and long-term engagement for local partners that makes DW assignments effective. Overemphasising the voluntary nature of the work would inevitably have a negative effect on its efficacy.
2. At the operational level, detailed appraisals of project secondments have either not taken place at all or have been inadequate. DW assignments have then not been properly aligned with partner needs, and not infrequently their efficacy has suffered as a result. There is also a need to improve concrete support for DWs, as well as three-way communication between the assigning organisation, the DW and the local partner organisation.

Overall, the factors listed in the box below proved key to the efficiency of DWs in local partner organisations:

Potential conflict between the bottom-up approach of DWs and the top-down approach of official programmes of bilateral German development cooperation

Not infrequently, DWs' close links to local partners may not sit well with official programmes of bilateral development cooperation, whose partners are national state implementing organisations. In many areas of activity, the interests and needs of national partners differ from those of the local organisations with which DWs are placed. This brings us to a fundamental problem of development cooperation: Despite all the advantages of an active multi-level system, seeking to remain responsive to national governments while at the same time remaining responsive to grass roots organisations (which often have different preferences) can lead to conflicting objectives. Having correctly understood the way in which they are supposed to work, DWs often voice uncomfortable 'bottom-up' views in programmes of official bilateral development cooperation. The latter often seek to pursue approaches that may not match the needs of local partner organisations.

The precautions taken by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH to prevent such situations from arising, and the way GIZ deals with them when they do, have so far often been inadequate. The instrument is often not put to effective use because programme activities are implemented on a one-sided (top-down) basis, and there are no incentives within GIZ to take account of views communicated by DWs in the programme. GIZ has recently undertaken

| | Essential factors | Additional enabling factors |
|--|---|--|
| Conditions within the partner organisation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Management of the partner organisation possesses the will to change • Flexibility of the partner organisation • Objectives of the DW secondment match the needs of the partner organisation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Long-term partnership between the assigning organisation and the partner organisation • Presence of one or several counterparts • Understanding of the role and tasks of DWs |
| Conditions within the assigning organisation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participation of the partner organisation in appraisal of the project secondment • Flexibility of the assigning organisation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continuous support of the DW assignment, and communication between the assigning organisation and the partner organisation |
| DW profile and activities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technical expertise and professionalism • Understanding of advisory work and relevant prior experience of applying it (encompassing social and communicative skills, capacity for learning and reflection, basic attitude to normative issues) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Linkage of advisory and operational activities |
| Mechanisms/drivers of efficacy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creation of common experiential knowledge • Ownership • Trust | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Independent, external perspective Empowerment |

appropriate measures such as improved design, management and implementation to take account of the specific features of DWs. Consciously tackling the potential conflict outlined remains a core challenge, however.

Under the conditions described, the DWs integrated into official development cooperation are unable to make exhaustive use of their greater potential for scalability and sustainability.

Conclusions and recommendations

DWs can still be considered an effective and modern instrument for the secondment of personnel to the Global South. They bring specific development cooperation expertise and methodological skills to bear while working with local partner organisations on equal terms, and therefore operate in accordance with the modern principle of ownership in development cooperation. Particularly in the Least Developed Countries, this specific way of working is still in demand because partner organisations there remain dependent on capacity development support provided through external expert assignments. This is also the case among partner organisations operating in pockets of poverty in middle income countries and emerging economies.

References

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We expressly support the continued use of the instrument ,DW'. To make exhaustive use of its potential, however, we recommend the following:

- The increasing demands of partner organisations regarding the qualifications of DWs should be reflected more clearly in the DW Leitbild-paper. The DW profile described in the paper should be updated accordingly.
- Due to deficits in the appraisal of project secondments and in the resulting partnership agreements, the DWs assigned are often only able to meet the needs of partner organisations to a limited extent. The Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) should therefore seek to reach a joint agreement with the assigning institutions concerning the improved appraisal of project secondments.
- Given the identified potential conflicts between the logic of official development cooperation programmes and the needs of partner organisations to which DWs are assigned, we recommend placing a stronger focus on these needs when designing and managing programmes. This should be reflected in clearer agreements on objectives between the programme management, the implementing partner and the partner organisation to which the DW is assigned. In this context the tasks and role of DWs should be discussed and agreed on clearly.



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