

REPORTING ON DEVELOPMENT POLICY DURING THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

Findings of the DEval Opinion Monitor for Development Policy 2021

Key findings

- In Germany, development policy is rarely mentioned on the TV news, in print media or on Twitter. When the first COVID-19 lockdown was introduced, the space given to it on the TV news and in the print media shrank even further.
- From March 2020 onwards, when development policy was mentioned in the media this usually occurred in conjunction with the topics of 'health' and 'pandemics'.
- Implication: Development actors can seek to make the relevance of development interventions more evident by pointing to the global containment of the pandemic as an example.

The coronavirus pandemic, media reporting and public opinion on development policy

Since early 2020 the coronavirus pandemic has been creating huge health policy, economic and social challenges for the international community. In this setting, international solidarity and cooperation are imperative. Whether and to what extent people support development cooperation measures depends amongst other things on media reporting. As most people do not come into contact with development-policy issues in their daily lives, the media play an important role in forming their opinions.

Since the beginning of 2020 the coronavirus pandemic has been dominating media reporting, and displacing numerous other issues in the process. At the same time, the pandemic is a global challenge that offers opportunities to link it with reporting on

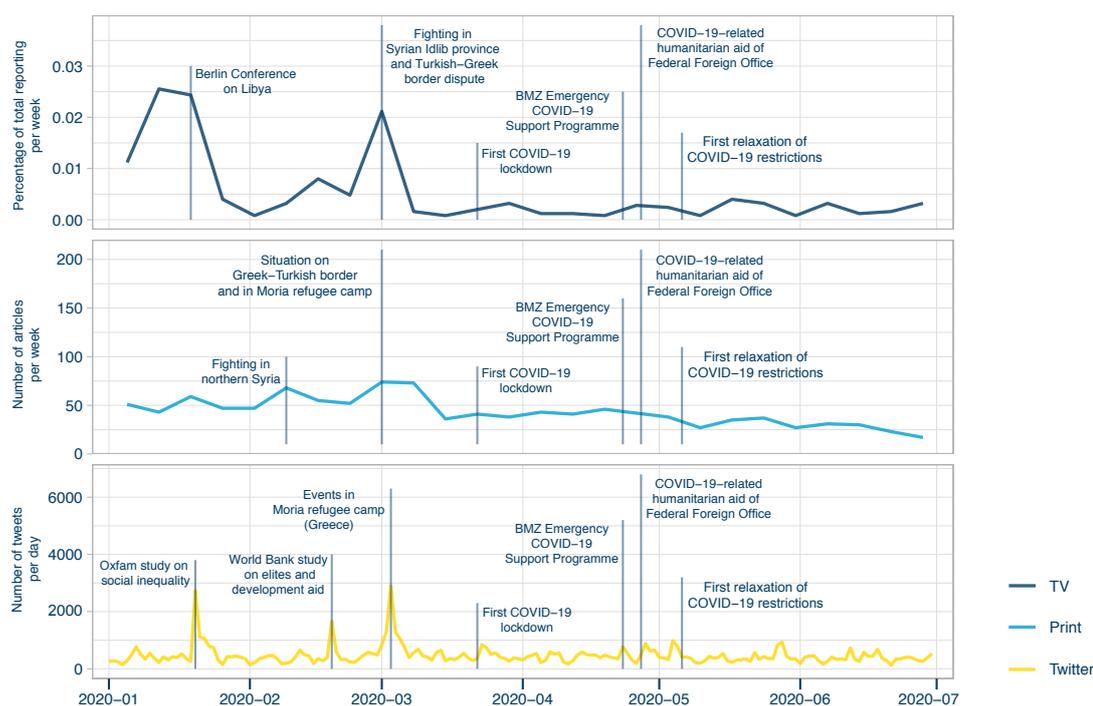
aspects of development cooperation. Against this backdrop, in its Opinion Monitor for Development Policy 2021 (Schneider et al., 2021) DEval pursued the following questions: What role did development-related content play in media reporting during the initial months of the coronavirus pandemic? Did the issues in connection with which reporting on development took place change during the pandemic? And what are the implications of this for development actors?

The analyses are based on TV news produced by public service broadcasters, national and regional daily and weekly newspapers, and the short messaging service Twitter. They focus on the period from January to June 2020.

Less space given to development policy during the first months of the coronavirus pandemic

Development policy usually receives barely any attention in the analysed media. As Figure 1 shows, however, in the first quarter of 2020 development issues did receive more attention sporadically on the TV news and on Twitter – for instance in connection with current events involving flight and migration. However, once the coronavirus pandemic began in March 2020, these issues virtually disappeared from view. In the print media, reporting on development-related issues was more homogeneous overall. Once the first lockdown was approved (on 16 March 2020) the number of reports fell slightly. The first measures launched by the Federal Foreign Office and the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) to fight the pandemic globally also did not lead to any significant increase in reporting on development policy in any of the media studied.

Figure 1. Development-related content on TV news, in print media and on Twitter



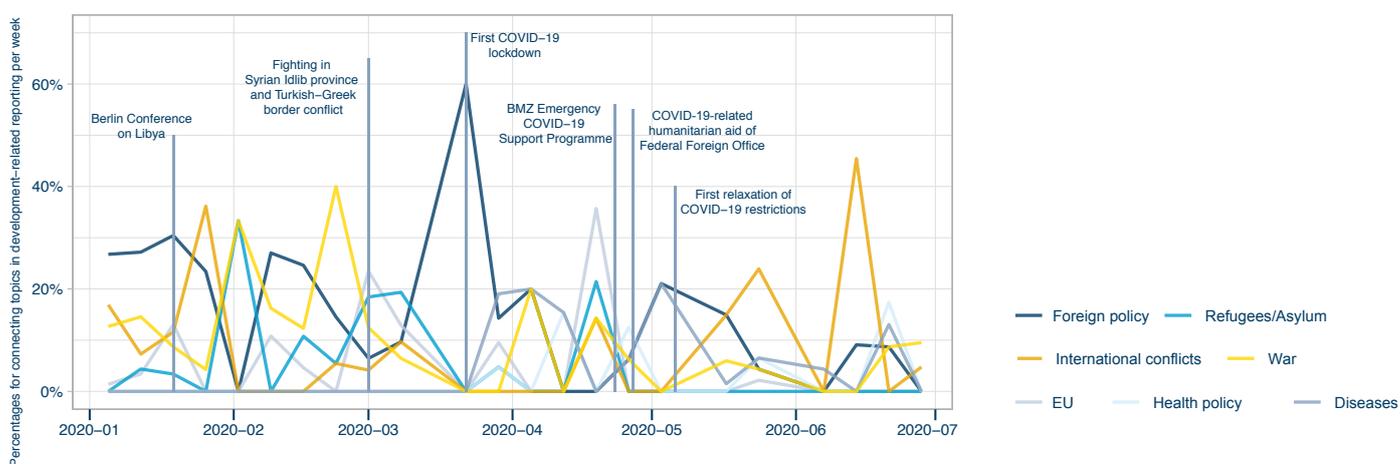
Source: authors' own graphic; databases used: MediaTenor (TV), LexisNexis (print) and Meltwater (Twitter); period covered: 1 January – 30 June 2020. Print: Bild, Die Welt (including WAS), Die Zeit (including Magazin), FAZ (including FAS), Süddeutsche Zeitung, taz, Nordwest-Zeitung, Nürnberger Nachrichten, Rheinische Post, Sächsische Zeitung. TV: ARD-Tagesschau, ARD-Tagesthemen, ZDF-heute, ZDF-heute-journal. The TV news were analysed by coders. For print media and Twitter automatic text analysis methods were used. The figures for TV news are percentages; those for print media and Twitter represent the number of articles/tweets respectively. For TV news and print media weekly figures are shown; daily figures are shown for Twitter due to the more dynamic nature of the medium. The events shown are not necessarily causally linked to the peaks in the graph through time. For details of the analysis, see Schneider et al. (2021, Section 2).

Coronavirus pandemic also reflected in reporting on development policy

Development policy is usually covered in the media in connection with the topics 'war and conflict', 'flight and migration' or 'climate change'. During the coronavirus pandemic it has also been covered in the context of 'health' and 'pandemics'. A close look at the first months of 2020 reveals, for instance, that on TV news the connecting topics 'foreign policy', 'international conflicts', 'war' and refugees/asylum did go through phases of slightly higher values than the other topics ('EU', 'health policy',

'diseases') (Figure 2). From the first lockdown onwards, higher values were also evident for the categories 'diseases' and 'health policy', while the figures for 'refugees/asylum' and 'war' declined. For print media and Twitter – media that have greater scope to cover a broad range of topics – we see a similar variation in development-related topics (Figure 3). From March 2020 onwards, however, the coronavirus pandemic came very much to the fore, sometimes achieving values of 50 per cent. In the print media, reporting on the coronavirus pandemic as a percentage of all development-related reporting remained at a high level until the end of the period analysed, while for Twitter it declined.

Figure 2. Connecting topics on TV news



Source: authors' own graphic; databases used: MediaTenor; period covered: 1 January – 30 June 2020. For details of the analysis, see Schneider et al. (2021). The manually encoded system of categories for TV news differs from the automatic text analysis system for print media and Twitter. A selection of categories is shown. The events shown are not necessarily causally linked to the peaks in the graph through time.

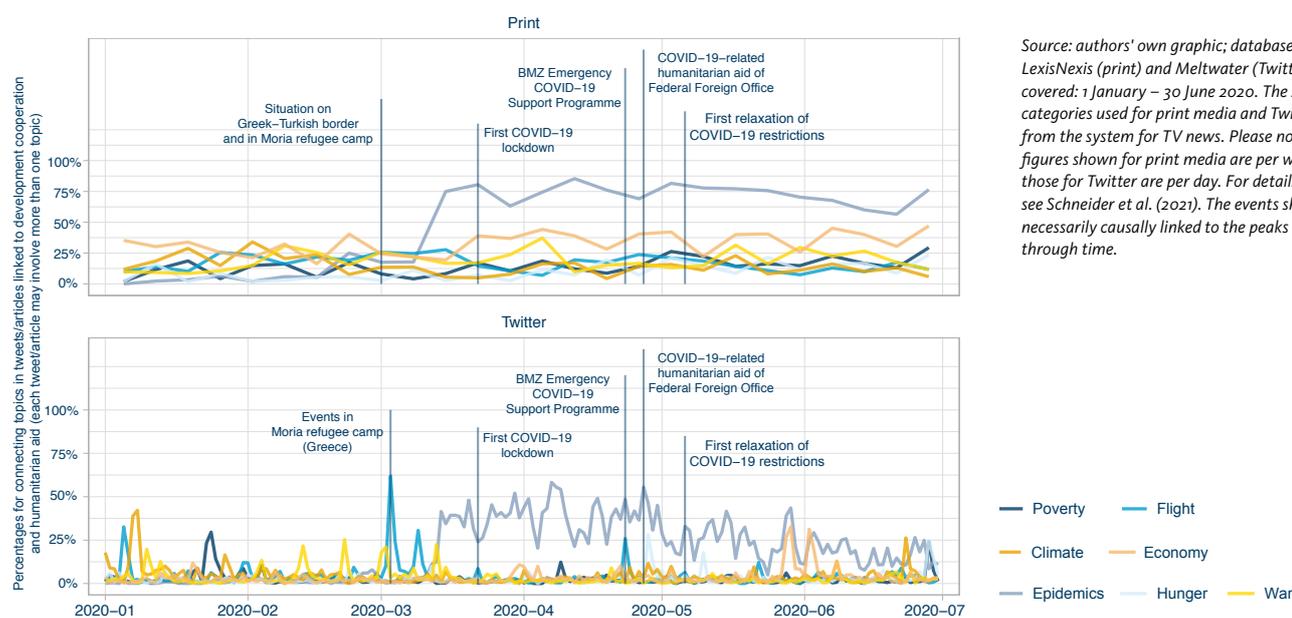
Implications for development practitioners

As is clear from the analysis, the generally low level of attention paid by the media to development policy fell even further once the COVID-19 restrictions began. However, the analyses also showed that this trend has so far not led to a decline in support for development cooperation measures among the general public (Schneider et al., 2021).

Where reporting on development policy did occur during the COVID-19 restrictions, this was often in connection with the topics of 'health' and 'pandemics'. Given that the pandemic is persisting, particularly in developing countries, this affords development

practitioners an opportunity to try to persuade the German public of the importance of development cooperation measures for containing the coronavirus sustainably. Given how little space is afforded to development cooperation in the traditional media, it would make sense to work more closely with social media influencers. Generally speaking, communication on development cooperation should be designed to enable the public to understand, in ways that make sense in the context of their everyday lives, the need for global solidarity and the relevance, scope and effectiveness of development cooperation. The challenge for development actors is to avoid neglecting development policy's contribution to solving other global challenges and to promoting sustainable development.

Figure 3. Connecting topics in print media and on Twitter



Literature

Schneider, S. H., Eger, J. und Sassenhagen, N. (2021), *Opinion Monitor for Development Policy 2021 – Media content, information, appeals and their impact on public opinion*, Deutsches Evaluierungsinstitut der Entwicklungszusammenarbeit (German Institute for Development Evaluation) (DEval), Bonn, <https://bit.ly/3joRfG>.



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