

GERMAN PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION IS FALLING – FIVE POSSIBLE EXPLANATIONS

Summary

Support for expenditure on development cooperation (DC) dropped significantly in Germany between January 2022 and January 2024. The following factors may explain this decline:

- negative attention peaks in the public discourse;
- unstable attitudes within the German population;
- a more negative perception of the individual's own economic situation and the national economic situation;
- a populist rhetoric that is directed against DC;
- a somewhat polarising effect of the new feminist guiding principle of German foreign and development policy.

As the latest figures do not suggest a reversal of the trend, DC should adapt its strategy and communications accordingly.

Since the discussion about the federal budget in autumn 2023, the general public has been increasingly critical of German development policy. This criticism comes in the wake of a series of successive and interwoven crises: the Covid-19 pandemic; the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in 2021; the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, which began in 2022; and the conflict in the Middle East, which has flared up again since 2023. All of these conflicts are associated with increased migration to Germany. The war against Ukraine and its consequences have also led to rising living and energy costs. This has further exacerbated the tense economic situation in Germany and increased the pressure on the federal budget, thereby contributing to the premature end of the SPD/Green/

FDP coalition, which had been in power since the end of 2021. Donald Trump's return to the White House means that further foreign and economic policy challenges are likely from 2025 onwards, which could also have an effect on German development policy.

Against this backdrop, this policy brief addresses the following questions:

1. How has the German population's support for development policy changed in recent years?
2. How can these developments be explained, and what are the implications for DC?

The policy brief will answer these questions using survey data from the *Development Engagement Lab* (DEL) and the findings of both the Opinion Monitor for Development Policy 2024 (Schneider et al., 2024) and an academic publication to which the DEval team responsible for the Opinion Monitor contributed (Bayram et al., 2024).

German public support for development cooperation over the course of time

German public support for the current DC/ODA expenditure has reduced significantly since January 2022, even though a relatively high level of support was observed throughout the Covid-19 crisis. The most recent available survey (June 2024) showed a slight increase in support once again. When compared with the previous decline, however, this constitutes a stabilisation at a low level –the values from the period before January 2022 were not reached again. Figure 1 on the following page shows the details: the proportion of respondents who would like to increase, or at least maintain, the current level of DC/ODA expenditure fell from 68 percent in January 2022 to 48 percent

in January 2024. The proportion that wants to reduce this expenditure rose from 19 to 43 percent in the same period. It is important to emphasise that German public support for the current DC/ODA expenditure is declining across the entire political spectrum, albeit with varying degrees of intensity. When respondents were asked to select the policy area that should be prioritised for a reduction in expenditure, the two most frequent responses in January 2024 were DC and unemployment benefits, each mentioned by 21 percent of respondents.

Development policy and DC have also lost support in general terms in the period under consideration. The data shows that DC has, on the whole, received less support since January 2022. In addition, the sense of a moral obligation to the countries in the Global South is diminishing. The perceived effectiveness of DC and people's sense of being able to achieve something themselves in the area of development policy, known as self-efficacy, are also on the decline.

How can we explain these trends?

There are no studies that analyse different factors at the same time, but there is scientific evidence for individual explanations (see Figure 2 on the following page).

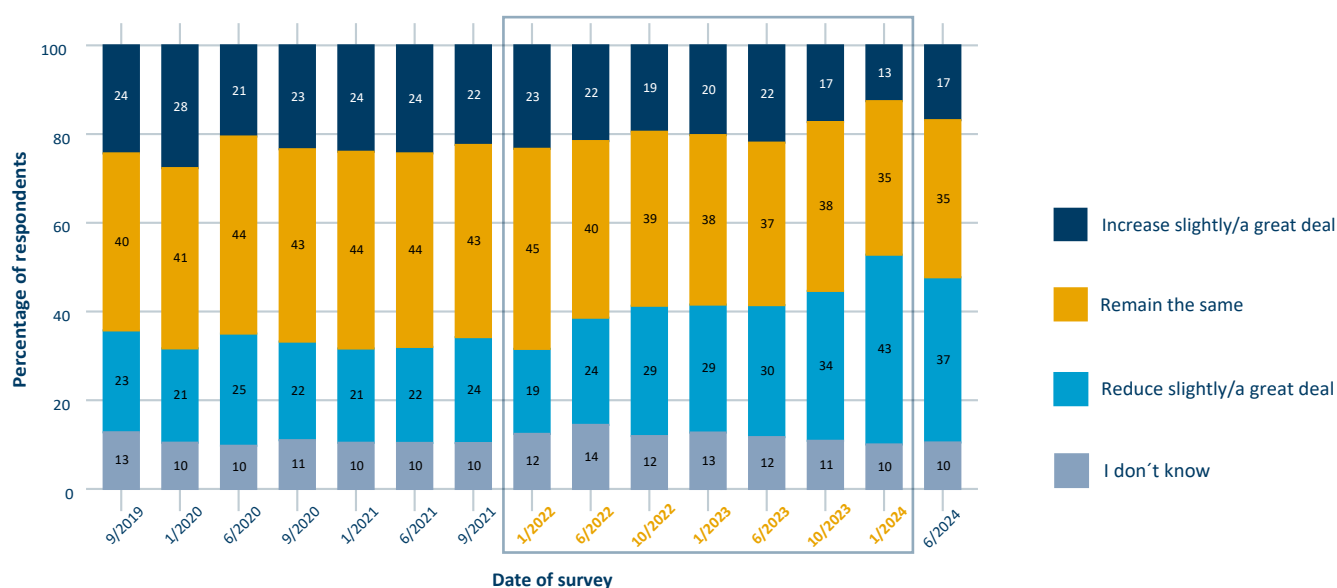
Negative attention peaks

Analyses of the data from Twitter/X show that there were unusual attention peaks for DC, especially in connection with the preparation of the federal budget at the end of 2023 and the protests of German farmers at the beginning of 2024 (Schneider et al., 2024, Section 3.2.3). The number of posts that explicitly refer to development cooperation was, at up to 9,000 tweets per day, approximately twice as high as the biggest spikes since the beginning of the analysis in 2019. These attention peaks relate directly to criticism of DC expenditure. In the case of individual projects such as “bicycle paths in Peru”, for example, users criticised the orientation, effectiveness, and costs of development policy – sometimes on the basis of incorrect facts. This intense (negative) attention was unusual for a policy area that is rather distant from everyday life as is the case with DC. It stands to reason that it has had a negative impact on support for DC within the German population.

Unstable attitudes

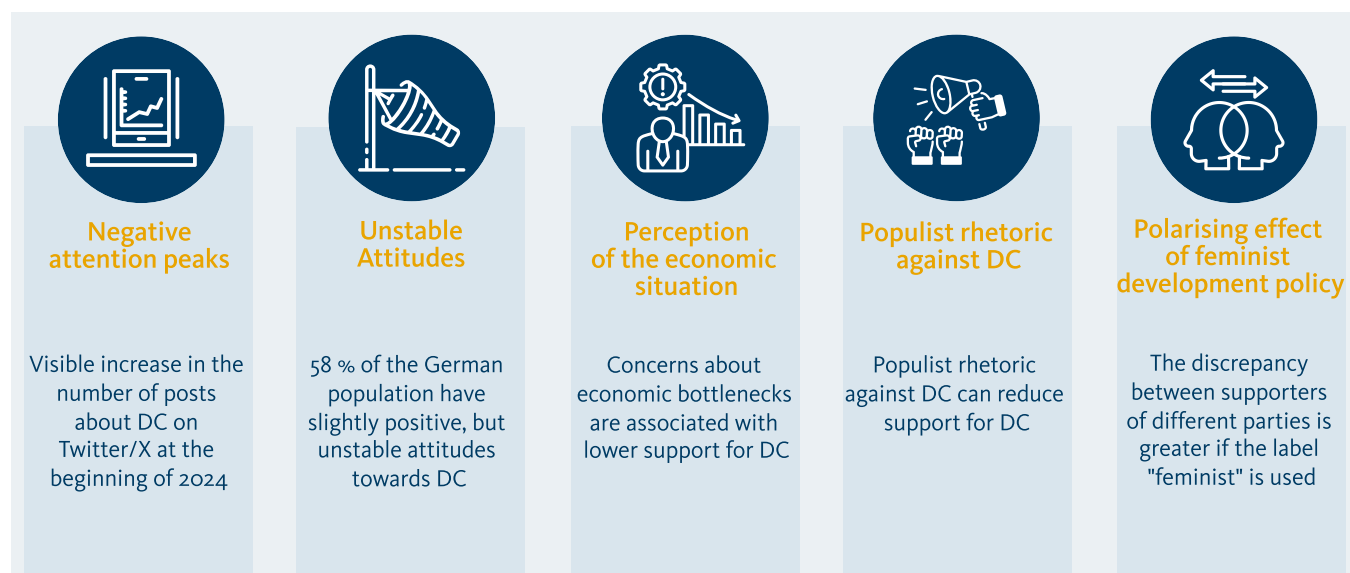
Studies also show that whilst almost 60 percent of the general public in Germany do support DC to a moderate degree, these attitudes are unstable (Schneider et al., 2024, Section 3.4). Conversely, just under 20 percent of the general public in Germany are stable supporters of DC whilst a similar

Figure 1 Public support for the current DC/ODA expenditure in Germany (2019–2024)



Source: DEval, own visualisation. Source of the data: DEL panel (N ≈ 6,000) and DEL tracker (N ≈ 1,000) 2019 to 2024. Weighted data.

Note: due to its publication date, the Opinion Monitor for Development Policy 2024 (Schneider et al., 2024) is only able to present the period up to January 2024.

Figure 2 Explanations for the decline in support for DC

Source: DEval, own visualisation; on the basis of the results in Schneider et al. (2024) and Bayram et al. (2024).

proportion are stable opponents. Unstable positive attitudes have contributed to a broad consensus regarding development policy for a long time; however, they are particularly fluid in the context of the other factors mentioned here and thus probably contribute towards the observed reversal of opinion.

Perception of the economic situation in Germany

The Opinion Monitor 2024 (Schneider et al., 2024, Section 4.3) also points out that people's perception of their own economic situation and the national economic situation has an impact on their support for DC. This perception was much more negative in 2022 in particular, but also in 2023, than in previous years. Longitudinal analyses of a panel survey also reveal that respondents who perceive the situation more negatively over the course of time exhibit less support both for DC in general and for the current DC/ODA expenditure. Furthermore, the results of a survey experiment showed that a reference to economic bottlenecks because of the tense situation regarding the federal budget causes support for DC to fall.

Populist rhetoric against DC

A cross-country experimental study has shown that populist rhetoric can reduce support for DC (Bayram et al., 2024). The findings for Germany suggest that people who consider themselves to be in the centre of the political spectrum or are uncertain of their political orientation are particularly open to this kind of rhetoric. Since the data for the study

was collected in 2019, the economic situation has deteriorated and discourse regarding development policy has become more intense. Therefore, it also seems likely that sections of the general public in Germany have become even more receptive to populist rhetoric in the meantime.

Polarising effect of a feminist foreign and development policy

The new feminist guiding principle of German foreign and development policy could also be a reason for the decline in support for development cooperation. Various analyses in the Opinion Monitor 2024 (Schneider et al., 2024, Section 4.4) show that the respondents do show some support for the contents of a feminist development policy, but rate this guiding principle less positively than alternative guiding principles – for example a “human rights-based” or “peace-promoting” development policy. The respondent's political orientation has an influence on their assessment of the policy. Sympathisers of Alliance 90/The Greens and The Left respond positively to the “feminist label”. However, use of this label leads supporters of the other parties to assess the described development policy more negatively than another development policy with the same contents. This suggests that choosing the label “feminist development policy” has a polarising effect on opinions and can thus reduce support for DC in sections of the general public in Germany.



Implications for German development policy

Alongside the explanations provided, it is possible to deduce the following implications for development policy strategy and communication work:

1. Anticipate negative attention peaks:

It is very likely that negative attention peaks will also occur in the future. Development policy actors should prepare for this and see this as an opportunity to effectively introduce their arguments into public discourse.

2. Consider unstable attitudes:

If various development policy actors are aware of the attitude strength of their target groups, they can gear their strategies and communications accordingly. For example, the target groups of development NGOs with their members and donors may have “more stable” positive attitudes towards DC than the target groups of government organisations or campaign organisations, which explicitly also have to keep an eye on the attitudes of the wider population.

3. Take concerns about the economic situation seriously:

Periods of scanty budgetary resources and economic downturn pose special challenges for development policy. Clearly formulated

goals, constant monitoring of the effectiveness of measures, and the resulting adjustments allow development policy actors to refine the substance of the development work in an impact-oriented way and to present its relevance convincingly.

4. Counter populist rhetoric with facts:

Around the Bundestag elections in 2025, criticism for DC will probably increase and the tone of the political debate will probably become harsher. This is very likely to strike a chord with sections of society, particularly in economically challenging times. There are no counter-strategies with guaranteed success. The most expedient approach here appears to be fact-based communication focusing on the need to overcome the existing international challenges.

5. Break down the feminist orientation of the development policy into its contents:

In the communication work, it seems sensible to convey the contents of a feminist development policy that receive comparatively broad support. In addition, it is important to carefully consider whether, in which contexts and for which target groups the “feminist” label, which has a somewhat polarising effect, is used for development policy.

Literature

Bayram A.B., S.H. Schneider, J. Faust and C. Thomson (2024), “Manipulating the masses? Right-wing populist messages, political ideology, and public support for multilateral development aid in Germany, the United States, and the United Kingdom”, *Journal of International Development*, vol. 36, No. 7, p. 2705–2724.

Schneider, S.H., A. Gödderz, H. Zille and M. Bruder (2024), *Opinion Monitor for Development Policy 2024. Public Support and Criticism in the Context of Multiple Crises and New Guiding Principles*, German Institute for Development Evaluation (DEval), Bonn.



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