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France and Germany: It is time to move towards a common development and cooperation policy

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Global development is under threat. The rising number of refugees worldwide, the protracted humanitarian crises in fragile states, and the increasingly visible impacts of climate change, are some of the warning signals that "inclusive", "sustainable" or "good" development, whatever you might call it, is not close at hand. The need for collective action has rarely been higher, and our collective capacity to reverse unsustainable trends never been so limited. Europe is no exception. Despite being the club of a number of official development assistance (ODA) champion countries, its collective response to development problems is being undermined by the temptation of short-term political benefits and a narrow, populist and nationalist vision of EU member states' common interest.

This is why we see a need to look for more flexible coalitions and networks in support of global development. One of the most important driving forces could be a much closer collaboration between

France and Germany. Here is why.

Three reasons for closer cooperation

First of all, there are strong historical reasons for close cooperation between France and Germany in many areas. If we look at the Élysée Treaty signed by General Charles de Gaulle, President of the French Republic, and Konrad Adenauer, Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, in 1963, the level of ambition for development cooperation was quite high at the time: “With regard to aid to developing countries, both Governments will systematically compare their programmes with a view to maintaining close cooperation. They will study the possibility of engaging in joint undertakings.” Nevertheless, although there are a few good examples of joint approaches (joint projects in the water sector in several countries) and while the need for it has grown unabated in recent decades, the originally envisaged level has not been achieved.

Second, the current French Presidential term and the German chancellor’s term are still in their initial stages. For both governments, a “new departure for Europe” is a top priority for their agendas, along with the overhaul of European strategies and structures. Although several aspects are understood from different perspectives, recent trends already show increased interest in closer cooperation. The 2017 Franco-German Ministerial Council, for example, discussed several development-related topics. The “Alliance for Sahel” which is mainly pushed by France, Germany and the EU (plus some other partners) could serve as an important model for joint and inclusive partnerships. We are now in a situation where we could create momentum for more common efforts in the field of global development between the two countries. This would in turn facilitate and support the more focussed and enhanced EU external action called upon by High Representative Federica Mogherini in the EU Global Strategy, as well as by Commission President Jean-Claude Junker’s proposal on the EU’s Multiannual Financial Framework (see IDDRI’s blog post on “Greening the EU budget”).

Third, there is obvious value in the United Kingdom and the EU maintaining the closest possible cooperation on development after Brexit. Both need each other’s invaluable expertise and financing instruments. Leaving aside the UK’s contribution to EU current external action finance (12%), it is clearly in Germany and France’s common interest to have the UK on board across the largest possible range of means of contributing to European development policy, in particular in fragile states where the EU track record remains patchy. A joint vision and strategy on development issues and on a “EU-UK international cooperation post Brexit package” by Germany and France could create the impetus for keeping close ties between UK and EU development policy after Brexit, while strengthening the continental development profile of the EU.

How to proceed?

France-Germany closer cooperation is by no means the panacea for solving the problem EU is facing and should not be considered as a step towards a two-speed Europe. Still, closer cooperation between the two countries on development topics could enhance EU visibility and impact. It could materialise in the following ways:

- At political level, with the use of the next Franco-German Ministerial Council to prepare a joint initiative towards Africa and the most vulnerable countries, to be launched at the next G7 during the upcoming French presidency (2019).

- At institutional level, there is a pragmatic need to accomplish the last steps towards merging AFD and CDC in France and make the new structure an equal partner to KfW. This would not only facilitate the conversation between Germany and France. It would also provide a considerable leverage to the EU's three main "development financing arms" (KfW, EIB, AFD+) and offer to partner countries a comprehensive "progressist" development package deal.

- At knowledge-generation level, we need to have a Franco-German brainstorming platform to provide critical thinking on strategic priorities, lessons learned and policy gaps. For such debates, we propose to have joint discussions organised and informed by think tanks such as DIE and IDDRI, with the support of thinks tank networks such as the European Think Tank Group (ETTG), academic institutions, development cooperation institutions, members of Parliament and non-state actors. Such a brainstorming process should lead to a series of independent joint reports and recommendations paving the way for more efficient and sustainable joint cooperation among the two countries.

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