



Federal Ministry
for Economic Cooperation
and Development

BMZ Position Paper

Overcoming Fragility

Goals and approaches for effective development policy



Contents

1	Fragility presents a challenge to sustainable development	4
2	Lessons for development policy on how to respond to fragility	6
3	The goals of the BMZ	8
4	Approaches pursued by the BMZ	10

1 Fragility presents a challenge to sustainable development

Fragility presents a major challenge to sustainable economic and social development. Fragility means that a state's capacity to ensure that the people enjoy human rights and to provide basic services for them is inadequate, as is its ability to provide protection for the people, because its capacity to exercise its monopoly on the use of force is limited. Fragility can have many causes, which include poor governance, unequal power distribution, and postcolonial structures. Countries affected by fragility often have no – or only weak – government institutions, and these institutions enjoy little legitimacy. Such countries also lack reliable control over the use of force by the government. As a result, confidence between the state and the people has often been eroded.

Fragility poses a barrier to achieving the goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It exacerbates hunger, poverty and inequality and increases the likelihood of violent conflict, oppression of minorities, and displacement. Fragility poses a threat to democracy, gives rise to corruption, and hampers economic growth. Gender inequality is particularly pronounced in fragility-affected states. The incidence of sexual and gender-based violence is higher. Moreover, countries affected by fragility often lack the necessary capacity and have very little resilience for responding to external economic and environmental risks. Countries' geographical location plays a role in this, as it may mean they are particularly exposed to climate change.

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), one in four people worldwide and three in four people in extreme poverty live in fragility-affected countries, and this share is increasing. In 2022, 78 per cent of all displaced people originated from countries affected by fragility. Fragility is not limited to poorer countries. It is also growing in middle-income countries.

It leads to ruptures in governmental and societal structures, thus deepening social and political divides. Various external risks that have an impact on these fragile structures – for instance economic shocks, global pandemics, destabilisation through factors such as terrorism and hybrid threats (such as disinformation campaigns), the impact of climate change, and biodiversity loss – can lead to severe crisis and even to violent conflict. For instance, in a country with a fragility-affected state or society, a failed harvest caused by severe climate change-induced drought may lead to famine, which in its turn may impact on conflicts over the distribution of resources. However, if a failed harvest happens in a resilient setting, the shock can be cushioned – for example through social protection systems – so that no human lives are at stake. External risks may have a negative impact on state and social fragility and exacerbate it. This is what development cooperation seeks to address. It fosters resilient capacity to achieve a transformation towards peaceful, effective and inclusive societal and state structures.

While fragility is often accompanied by violent conflict or severe crisis, it cannot be reduced to these factors. The Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) defines fragility as a phenomenon that is subject to multidimensional influences from areas such as security, society, the economy, the environment, and governance, and that takes different forms depending on the context. This multidimensional definition of fragility includes countries where fragility is latent – that is, not immediately visible – and where no violent conflict or severe crisis has taken place (yet). Even in seemingly stable middle-income countries, economic shocks and natural disasters can turn latent fragility into instability.

This is the reason why Germany looks at issues of fragility in all of its development policy. Germany's development activities in fragility-affected countries

are vital for Germany's ambition to contribute towards achieving the goals of the 2030 Agenda and to implement the Policy of Integrated Security laid down in Germany's National Security Strategy.¹

The contribution and goals of Germany's development policy in addressing fragility

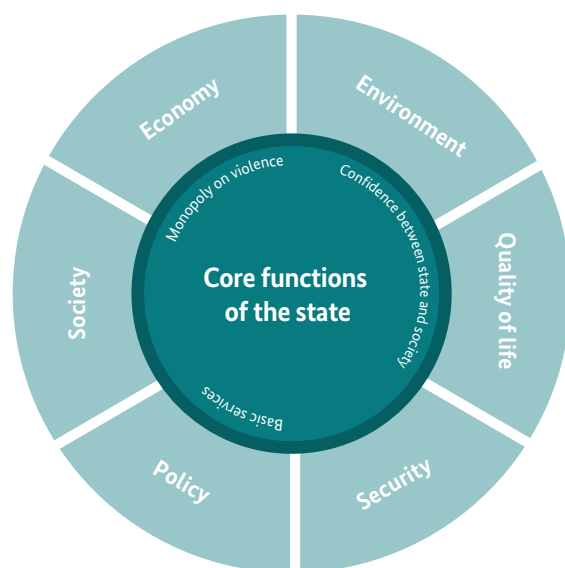
Through its development policy, the BMZ addresses the causes and impacts of fragility, thus helping to make sure that people can live in peace and security in a world where human rights, democracy and the rule of law are respected; where poverty, hunger and social and gender-based inequality are being reduced; and where people are not displaced or forced to risk their lives seeking refuge elsewhere. This vision is pursued through partnership-based cooperation at the local, national, regional and international levels with a view to reducing fragility and achieving sustainable development for all. Through these efforts, Germany is also facing up to its historical responsibility, as fragility is, not least, a consequence of colonialism.

In its cooperation with countries affected by fragility, the BMZ pursues **three fundamental goals**:

- Take early action to **prevent** fragility from increasing
- Strengthen the **resilience** of states and societies
- Foster **transformation** in order to address the causes of fragility through targeted action, thus reducing fragility

By reducing fragility in line with the concept of Integrated Security, Germany's development policy also contributes to the security of Germany itself. It is in Germany's interest that societies become less vulnerable to crisis and that regional conflicts do not spread. After all, the impacts of fragility in the BMZ's partner countries do not stop at national borders. The COVID-19 pandemic, the global energy and food crisis – which has been exacerbated by Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine – and the high number of displaced people are illustrations of these international interlinkages. Another aspect is the dependency of Germany's economy on stable supply chains and markets worldwide. And not least, Germany will only be able to tackle global challenges – especially the climate and biodiversity crisis – by increasing its multilateral partnerships and cooperation, not by reducing them. Development policy, complementing short-term humanitarian assistance, provides sustainable solutions that are particularly urgently needed in fragility-affected countries.

Definition of fragility used by the BMZ/ Functional definition of fragility in context



Source: BMZ diagram

¹ See www.nationalesicherheitsstrategie.de/en.html

2 Lessons for development policy on how to respond to fragility

In the last few years, many lessons have been learned in the field of development cooperation regarding what can be achieved in fragility-affected countries. One thing that became clear is that there is no one-size-fits-all solution. In countries that are affected by fragility, it is particularly important to engage in flexible, internationally coordinated, and context-specific activities based on in-country coordination with partners.

Germany's development activities are always guided by **principles** based on human rights, democracy and the rule of law. Respect, protection and fulfilment of human rights – especially the human rights of marginalised groups – and support for the most vulnerable people are central aspects in the BMZ's work (see *Human Rights Strategy for German Development Policy*²). In line with the concept of Integrated Security and with its feminist development policy, the BMZ works for resilient, just societies worldwide. The Ministry's development activities are geared towards overcoming discriminatory power structures so that all people will enjoy equal participation in social, political and economic life. In that context, the BMZ takes care to ensure that potential negative impacts of development cooperation may be recognised early on, prevented, and cushioned – by carrying out in-depth analyses, conducting regular monitoring, and coordinating with national and international partners. One potential negative impact, for example, would be the unintentional exacerbation of conflict by building infrastructure that only benefits one specific group within society.

The following are key lessons for development cooperation activities that address fragility.

Make more use of local knowledge

In order to create an impact in countries affected by fragility, the BMZ will ensure that even better use is made of knowledge about countries, regions and causes of conflict as it plans and manages its cooperation programmes. Local people have the best knowledge about local conditions. Depending on the context, this includes the knowledge of traditional and religious leaders, and youth. The BMZ will be consulting with these people more systematically as it plans and implements development activities, for example by involving target groups in preparing and monitoring projects. In this way, the BMZ will be making sure that people's needs are taken into account and sustainable solutions are developed in a joint effort. This enables the BMZ and other development players to get an even better idea of the situation on the ground and monitor change more closely, for instance with regard to power structures involving governmental and non-governmental players, and changes in how well people's basic needs are being met.

Define realistic goals

Cooperation with fragility-affected countries must be geared towards realistic goals. Such goals need to take account of the capacity of local partners and of the risks they are exposed to, and the goals need to be based on a critical assessment of what difference development cooperation can actually make. For example, in a conflict-affected country it may be a realistic goal to improve people's living conditions in terms of the provision of basic services. This type of stabilisation is a key approach used in development cooperation. By contrast, it may not always be possible to establish lasting structures or change local structures.

2 The BMZ's human rights strategy can be downloaded at www.bmz.de/resource/blob/209208/bmz-menschenrechtskonzept-a4-en-barrz-1-.pdf

Use instruments more flexibly and readjust them dynamically

The total set of German development instruments – that is bilateral cooperation, transitional development assistance, the Special Initiative “Displaced Persons and Host Countries”, and civil society and multilateral activities – must be tailored to the local context based on a country strategy. In crisis situations in particular, humanitarian assistance, development cooperation and peacebuilding should be pursued in a harmonised and combined manner, in line with the humanitarian-development-peace nexus. As the local situation in fragility-affected countries may change quickly, there must be scope for readjusting cooperation accordingly.

Joint ministerial evaluations of Germany’s civilian assistance in Iraq and Afghanistan³ have shown that fragility presents major challenges to development cooperation. For example, large areas of territory and important state institutions in Afghanistan were found to be under the control of local leaders, and state institutions enjoyed little legitimacy among the people. This political context has acted as a barrier for the establishment of a functioning democratic state based on the rule of law.

The evaluations also show that even in this difficult setting, Germany’s development cooperation has made an important contribution towards improving people’s living conditions. Experience elsewhere, for instance from development cooperation with countries in the Sahel, has been similar. There, development cooperation has brought about important achievements regarding basic services, infrastructure development, and support for local administrative institutions. One form of cooperation that has proven particularly effective is close harmonisation and interaction with multilateral players (such as the United Nations and the World Bank) in line with the humanitarian-development-peace nexus, with a focus on building the resilience of local communities, fostering stabilisation, and thus simultaneously reducing the need for humanitarian assistance. According to the United Nations (UNDRR), one dollar invested in prevention saves up to 15 dollars in reconstruction costs after a disaster.

³ The evaluation on Iraq was conducted together with the Federal Foreign Office; the evaluation on Afghanistan was conducted jointly with the Federal Foreign Office and the Federal Ministry of the Interior. See www.bmz.de/en/ministry/evaluation.

3 The goals of the BMZ

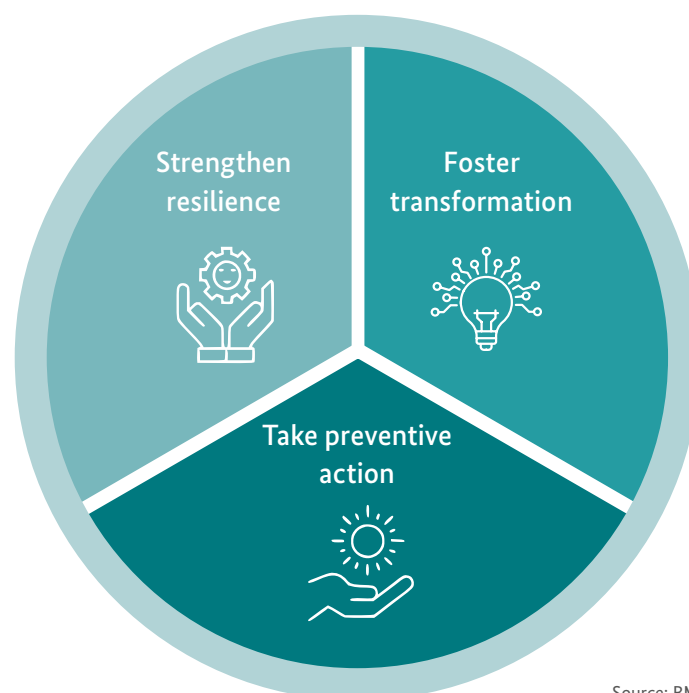
Germany's development policy addresses the causes and impacts of fragility in the BMZ's partner countries. To that end, the BMZ pursues the following goals:

Take early action to prevent fragility from increasing

The BMZ's goal is to prevent crises from emerging in the first place. Preventing violent conflict, epidemics and the severe impacts of extreme weather events reduces human suffering, protects development gains and is more effective and cost-effective than responding to crises. That is why Germany's development policy is geared towards early prevention, and also disaster preparedness. In this way, it contributes to peaceful and inclusive communities, by always paying attention to fair access to resources and reliable basic services. When there is a risk of violence escalating, the BMZ strengthens mechanisms for non-violent conflict management, for instance through dialogue and mediation platforms. For example, the BMZ is working with the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) to assist Mauritania in implementing the Global Compact on Refugees.

Because of its political and economic stability, Mauritania is considered an important player in the Sahel, and a safe destination for refugees. The country currently hosts about 250,000 refugees. The BMZ's work includes support for the inclusion of refugees and vulnerable members of host communities in national social protection systems. The BMZ is also working to strengthen people's equal access to public services such as education, health and employment promotion. Such improvements have been demonstrated to reduce people's dependence on humanitarian aid and to increase their longer-term prospects for integrating locally or returning to their home countries. This inclusive approach – which targets not only refugees but also people in host communities – fosters social cohesion and prevents conflicts over the distribution of resources, as well as radicalisation and extremism caused by discrimination, inequality, poverty and lack of opportunities. This prevents fragility from increasing and helps to stabilise people's living conditions in the region.

Addressing fragility – the BMZ's goals



Source: BMZ diagram

Strengthen the resilience of states and societies

Germany's development activities in fragility-affected countries are always geared towards increasing the resilience of people and societies against crises and external shocks, and towards strengthening social cohesion. Building resilience pays off, because resilience reduces the risk of new crises and the need for humanitarian assistance. The BMZ enables people to provide for themselves so they are not dependent on external assistance – for instance by giving them access to seeds, fertiliser and water and enabling them to use climate-smart cultivation methods and engage in sustainable fishing and animal husbandry. This improves their food security. In 2022, Niger experienced a severe drought, which led to a major food crisis. In the previous years, the BMZ had improved people's access to water and created additional farmland areas and irrigation canals in order to improve people's resilience against drought. Thanks to these activities, 80 per cent of the villages in the most affected regions did not require humanitarian aid. About half a million people were able to meet their own food needs in spite of the food crisis.

Foster transformation – address causes of fragility and reduce fragility

In order to achieve lasting development gains, Germany seeks to make its development activities as transformative as possible and to address the structural causes of fragility. The BMZ does this, for example, by building state and community capacity for better dealing with external risks such as the impact of climate change and economic shocks. Another potential structural cause of fragility is autocratic governance. The BMZ therefore pursues the goal of fostering and protecting democracy. In that context, the Ministry supports constructive relations between the state and society. This involves, for example, efforts to foster political, economic and social participation. The BMZ also takes action against online disinformation. Disinformation can increase fragility and instability by undermining social cohesion and people's confidence in government institutions. Relevant efforts are pursued, among other things, through cooperation with civil society and youth, and through training for media workers and media users offered by Deutsche Welle Akademie.

Further activities involve enabling governments to facilitate social participation. Important contributions towards reducing fragility are also made through efforts to protect human rights – including freedom of speech and of the press –, foster gender equality, fight corruption, support the rule of law and build the capacity of civil society⁴. One example is the BMZ's support for the peace process in Colombia, which it began providing in 2008. The process led to a historic peace agreement in 2016, even though armed groups are still active in some parts of the country. The BMZ's work focuses on overcoming the structural causes of conflicts and fragility. For example, the Ministry has been supporting governmental and civil society partners in drafting laws and organising compensation and land restitution, establishing a transitional justice system, and addressing human rights violations through the criminal justice system. Simultaneously, support is being provided for infrastructure improvement in remote regions and for creating paid work for local people. Efforts are also under way, in line with the BMZ's feminist development policy, to strengthen the political and economic participation of particularly marginalised groups such as women and LGBTIQ+ persons, Afro-Colombians, Indigenous people, youth, and refugees and internally displaced persons. This helps to reduce the causes of fragility and fosters lasting peace and stability.

⁴ See the BMZ's strategy on Cooperation with Civil Society (2024), www.bmz.de/resource/blob/225426/bmz-zivilgesellschaft-en-barrierefrei.pdf

4 Approaches pursued by the BMZ

In order to achieve these goals, the Ministry uses the following **approaches** among others.

Analyse fragility

In its development cooperation, the BMZ analyses the causes of fragility in its partner countries in order to tailor activities to the local situation. The analysis looks at the fragility risks which partner countries face, and the capacity available for dealing with these risks. It also examines potential unwanted negative impacts which development cooperation may have.

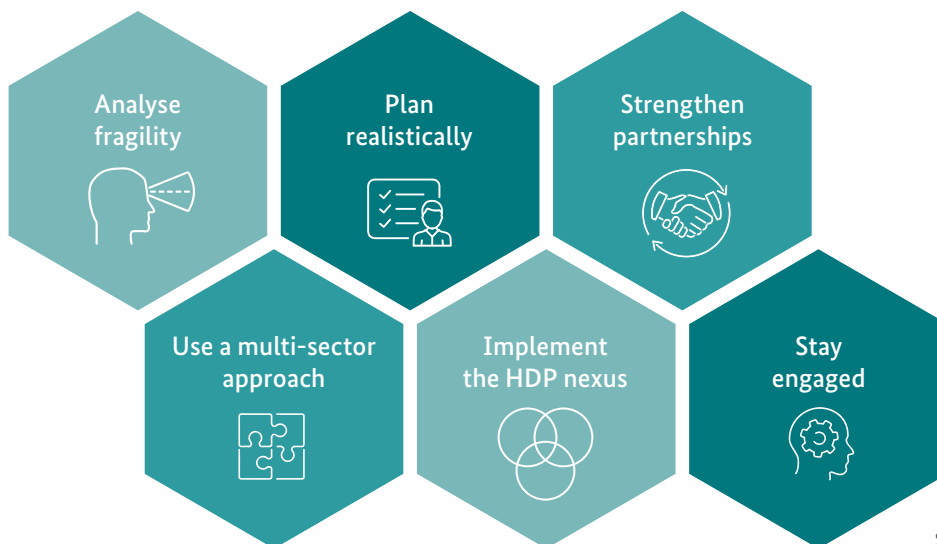
Plan realistically

For its work in fragility-affected countries, the BMZ defines realistic goals and identifies areas where goals may conflict with each other. It determines which needs it will be able to meet with its instruments and financial resources, and for which needs this will not be possible. It will be adjusting its cooperation even more flexibly to changing conditions by planning on the basis of scenarios. One central aspect is also improved coordination with other German ministries and other donors and harmonised planning based on realistic ambitions.

Continue to strengthen partnerships

The BMZ pursues its goals on the basis of participatory approaches and partnership-based cooperation at the local, national, regional and international levels. For example, it develops regional solutions, as fragility has spillover effects across national borders. In such efforts, the United Nations and regional organisations such as the African Union and the African regional economic communities are important (political) partners. The BMZ makes a point of working with governmental and non-governmental local players that are actively working for reforms and positive change. In line with the local context and the powers and capacities of the respective players, important implementing partners may include local and international civil society, the private sector, and multilateral organisations. This enables the BMZ to remain engaged even in volatile contexts. Along the same lines, the Ministry also plays its role in shaping EU development cooperation. The BMZ believes that, wherever possible, Team Europe approaches should be pursued.

Addressing fragility – the BMZ’s approaches



Source: BMZ diagram

Use a multi-sector approach

In view of multiple overlapping crises, and in order to respond appropriately to the different forms of fragility, the BMZ develops solutions that link different sectors and stakeholders. For example, it may use a holistic approach to address the impacts of fragility in terms of basic services, peacebuilding, and adaptation to climate change, because people need everything at the same time – peace and human security, education for their children, access to healthcare, and a basis for providing themselves with food.

Implement the humanitarian-development-peace nexus

The humanitarian-development-peace nexus is an important approach for the BMZ's work in countries where humanitarian assistance, development cooperation and peacebuilding efforts are under way in parallel. The nexus approach is based on the insight that interventions are more efficient and effective if an integrated effort is pursued to plan and implement humanitarian aid, development cooperation and peacebuilding. Such an integrated approach also reduces humanitarian needs. The BMZ therefore engages in coordination with other players within the German government – for instance with the Federal Foreign Office, based on the Joint Analysis and Joined-up Planning (GAAP) exercise – and with other donors. It also integrates its instruments in the multilateral framework. This enables the Ministry to respond more efficiently to complex crises. In line with the National Security Strategy and the Policy of Integrated Security laid down in that Strategy, the BMZ is also contributing to joined-up planning within the German government. In keeping with the German government's guidelines on civilian crisis prevention of 2017, the BMZ regards stabilisation as an important task for development policy, to be implemented primarily through efforts to improve basic services, strengthen social cohesion, and foster dialogue and mediation, for instance through the Civil Peace Service (CPS). Such stabilisation measures serve to create a safe environment, improve people's living conditions in the short term, and show people alternatives to economies of war and violence. This involves the flexible, harmonised use of diplomacy, transformative development policy and security policy measures. The BMZ is also working to further enhance the humanitarian-development-peace nexus and its implementation at the international and EU levels.

Stay engaged

In fragility-affected countries, there is a need for staying engaged in the long term in order to foster change or, sometimes, just in order to protect development gains and prevent the situation from further deteriorating. Whenever the political environment worsens, for instance through unconstitutional takeovers or severe human rights violations, development cooperation activities may be carried out without any cooperation with (central) government entities in order to provide continued support to the people – provided that the context allows this and there is space for this type of work. For example, civil society entities or local authorities may provide basic services for the people. In such situations, the BMZ supports them, for example, via the United Nations or civil society. This makes it possible for development cooperation to have a structural impact, foster community resilience and improve people's living conditions. Nonetheless, there are limits to what can be done. For example, civil society cannot simply make up for essential government services that are no longer available (such as respect, protection and fulfilment of human rights).

Development policy as a sustainable response to fragility

In a world with increasing crises, where cooperation is more vital than ever before, fragility is the new normal for development cooperation. Development policy involves long-term and partnership-based cooperation in line with the goals and principles of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, fostering global human security, peace and justice – because the focus in fragility-affected countries is on prevention, resilience and transformation. In that context, the BMZ invests in long-term partnerships, thus offering solutions that are also able to have an impact in fragility-affected countries. This is an essential contribution to Germany's Integrated Security and towards achieving the goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

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