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

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Bonn/Paris, 21 March 2018. 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 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 European Union (EU) member states’ common interests. 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 in 1963 by General Charles de Gaulle, president of the French Republic, and Konrad Adenauer, chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, 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 them 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 fourth 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 being 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 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 Juncker’s proposal on the EU’s Multiannual Financial Framework.

Third, there is obvious value in the United Kingdom (UK) 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 the EU’s current external action finance (12 per cent), it is clearly in Germany and France’s common interest to have the UK on board across the largest possible range of means for contributing to European development policy, in particular in fragile states where the EU’s track record remains patchy. A joint vision and strategy on development issues and on an “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?

Closer cooperation between Germany and France could materialise in the following ways:

At the political level, it could be achieved by using 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 summit during the upcoming French presidency of the G7 in 2019.

At the operational level, it could materialise by taking stock of – and stepping up – the existing cooperation initiatives of the bilateral development finance institutions. The L’Agence française de développement (AFD) and the German KfW Development Bank have been organising exchanges of professional staff at the project officer level for many years. This could be systematically extended to additional institutions as well as to strategic and executive positions with a view towards better aligning priorities and systematically exploring joint programming; it could also be extended to funding when engaging with partner countries and third-party donors, particularly from non-EU countries.

At the knowledge-generation level, we need to have a Franco-German brainstorming platform to provide critical thinking on strategic priorities, lessons learnt and policy gaps. For such debates we propose having joint discussions that are organised and informed by think tanks such as the German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE) and the Institute for Sustainable Development and International Relations (IDDRI), with the support of 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 that pave the way for more efficient and sustainable joint cooperation among the two countries.