

GP Follow-Up Paper

GP Circle Dinner

"Global Responsibility Needs Soft Power"

*Summary of the discussion prepared and published
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About the Format

On 5th June 2019, Global Perspectives Initiative hosted a private circle dinner in Berlin with representatives from politics, media, business, and civil society to discuss the importance of Germany's soft power in global development and ways to assume greater responsibility through multilateral and multi-stakeholder approaches. Participants from renowned organizations like The Global Fund, ONE, Open Society Foundations as well as the regional daily Der Tagesspiegel and the national weekly paper DIE ZEIT engaged in a lively discussion about how to ensure the nation's central leadership role in areas such as global health - especially with regard to the fragile state of our current international order. A special focus was on the role of foundations and media in shaping the public discourse and highlighting the potential benefits of multilateralism.

About the Global Perspectives Initiative

The Global Perspectives Initiative supports the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, which aim to make the world a fairer and safer place by 2030. GPI brings together stakeholders from politics, business, media, and society, discusses various approaches to sustainable global development, and motivates people to act. As a non-profit and neutral platform, the initiative gives rise to new ideas, raises awareness about the opportunities and challenges around the concept of a global society and thereby shapes the public discourse in Germany.

Thank you to our speaker and supporters

We would like to thank our keynote speaker Mark Suzman, Chief Strategy Officer and President Global Policy and Advocacy at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, for his constructive and inspirational input. Furthermore, GPI would like to express its gratitude towards all of our guests for supporting our work and being engaged in the discussion on sustainable global development.

The following paragraphs summarize debating points, discussion outcomes and proposed ideas for action. For further information on the event, please visit globalperspectives.org and our social media channels.

SUMMARY OF THE DISCUSSION

Introduction

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) was established in 2000, the same year that saw the adoption of the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by the United Nations. Fifteen years later the MDGs have been advanced to culminate in the more elaborate Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) until 2030. With years of unparalleled intensive consultations between international institutions, governments and civil society organizations, the SDGs set a new example of what inclusive multilateral working relationships can achieve. The ambitious goals set in the Agenda 2030 also require a new vision of partnerships moving forward that equally involve governments as well as the private sector, academia, civil society and philanthropic foundations.

Achieving the SDGs requires a new vision of multilateral cooperation moving forward.

Germany's demonstrated commitment to international cooperation and multilateralism has been lauded around the world in the past decade. Therewith, the country has earned a global leadership role and the standing of a valued and respected partner. Its reputation has also been coined by Angela Merkel's exerted soft power. Therefore, in the long run, maintaining this reputation will require more engagement from local foundations and actors from civil society and the private sector. But how can their impact be amplified and their engagement take an even larger stance at the global level?

Germany is committed to international cooperation and is perceived as a respected partner.

These and many other questions were discussed during our exclusive GP Circle Dinner. We were honored to have Mark Suzman, Chief Strategy Officer and President of Global Policy and Advocacy at the BMGF, as our keynote speaker for the evening. Mr Suzman shared his views on Germany's role in global development and what he has learned by leading strategy and advocacy for one of the world's largest and most influential private foundations. The following paragraphs outline a summary of the discussion of the evening.

Mark Suzman (BMGF) shared his views on Germany's role in global development.

Germany has taken on a global leadership role in multilateral contexts

A country's soft power and the ability to attract and win-over others without force are key when building lasting global coalitions. Countries develop this ability with the help of their values, language and culture, and most notably through the relentless work of institutions of civil society, churches, companies and foundations rather than just governments.

Civil society contributes to a major extent to a nation's soft power.

When it comes to Germany, the nation has learned how to leverage its soft power through multilateral and multi-stakeholder approaches and thereby stand for and defend its values and national interests. It is truly remarkable how Germany has become a leading voice not only in Europe, but globally as well - especially in light of the major challenges such as climate change, global health risks or forced migration and displacement. Additionally, with the liberal multilateral international order being constantly questioned and under attack, Germany has not shied away from assuming greater responsibility in multilateral contexts, exemplified by its actions in the G7, G20, the United Nations or the World Bank. While US and UK leadership roles have largely suffered due to domestic crises in the past years, Germany stayed on course, thereby consolidating its reputation as a stable and reliable partner in global development.

Despite the various global challenges, Germany has always remained committed to increase its responsibility in multilateralism.

Germany requires an intensified public discourse on global leadership and its benefits

Being a well-respected international player does not necessarily reflect the inside of a country. In Germany, for historical and other reasons, some parts of the society antagonize the country's global leadership role and demand a rather reserved, low-profile presence on the international stage.

The outcome of the European Elections even reinforced this image. The political, economic, socio-cultural, and environmental issues profoundly impacted not only Europe, but Germany and other European countries likewise. Since the elections, Germany was forced to deal with yet another governmental crisis, while politics in general turned to become more emotional and radical. Powerful forces aim to emphasize nationalistic and inward-looking sentiments and to put national interests first. Even though such nationalistic sentiments did not dominate the elections in Germany as climate change moved to the center of discussion, they must not be ignored.

Politics have become more radicalized often putting national interest first.

Participants also discussed the role of the media in helping to steer the public discourse on global challenges. They agreed that the public's awareness on the importance of international responsibility must be increased, including that none of the global problems can be solved at national level. Yet, global problems may turn into national problems. Therefore, withdrawing from a country's responsibility as a global leader will eventually have profound negative impacts at national level in the long-run.

The media has a responsibility in renewing the narrative around global leadership.

As young people around the world are increasingly standing up for their future and demand change, media may embrace this opportunity and depict the constructive arguments they are making in favor of global cooperation. Germany's soft power and positive influence on the world also strongly relies on the constant renewal of momentum. This also includes the narratives on the importance of multilateralism, why staying committed is pivotal and what benefits this entails for the larger public at national level, too.

Foundations must truly own a topic and look out for multilateral cooperation

The aforementioned political unpredictability and a critical public discourse have a strong influence on the work of civil society organizations and foundations as well. Over the last years, the confidence in large institutions, be it governments, financial institutions, corporations, and even large global foundations like the BMGF, has declined around the world. Thus, foundations require to act cautiously when engaging in public debates. An approach that is perceived as too strong may put their credibility and trust at risk – a currency they earned over years as experts in their respective areas of work.

Trust in all large institutions regardless of sector has declined worldwide affecting foundations as well.

Though there is no "one-size-fits-all" solution for how civil society organizations and foundations should move forward, many ideas for action were proposed by our guests. First and foremost, it was pointed out that it currently lacks German foundations with a strong focus on a specific area of engagement in global leadership. Many global foundations, such as the BMGF, the Wellcome Trust or Open Society Foundations, might be present in Germany. But only few German foundations *truly own* a topic by taking up a central leadership role in their respective fields. This may not involve direct advocacy in the sense of lobbying. But it may include intensified multi-stakeholder partnerships which would help leveraging their own engagement, too. According to Mark Suzman, prioritizing multilateral cooperation is something even the BMGF had to learn over time. However, it has become their preferred method and approach. By recently calling for a CO₂ tax in a joint communiqué, German foundations are showing first signs of choosing multilateral solutions for their societal goals.

German foundations need to engage more in multi-stakeholder partnerships to achieve scalable results in the long-run.

Conclusion

Especially from an outside perspective, Germany has indeed achieved a lot as a global leader in the last decade. Particularly in the field of global health, the nation has pushed many important initiatives forward and placed SDG3 action on the agenda - both - at home and in various multilateral settings. Nevertheless, a lot of work remains ahead. Germany's soft power and leadership role has always been beneficial, but it may not be taken for granted. And it requires domestic backing in order to have a lasting impact and drive a stronger global commitment and powerful alliances to tackle the various development challenges.

Publisher

Dr Ingrid Hamm
Global Perspectives Initiative gemeinnützige UG
(haftungsbeschränkt)
Schönhauser Allee 10 / 11
10119 Berlin, Germany

office@globalperspectives.org

Tel.: +49 (0)30 726 26 75 30

Fax: +49 (0)30 726 26 75 20

Project Manager

Bernadett Fekete

b.fekete@globalperspectives.org

Media Contact

Nadine Bütow

n.buetow@globalperspectives.org

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