



Mindcraft

Bridging and Mapping Knowledge
Gaps in Decentralised Cooperation

Country Profile on decentralised development cooperation

#2

GERMANY

Abbreviations

BLA-EZ
BLP
BMZ
CEMR
CSOs
DAC
DDC
DLT
DST
DStGB
EU
GDP
GIZ
GNI
LRGs
NAKOPA
MPK
RGRE
ODA
OECD
SKEW
UN
VKU

Federal Government and Federal States Committee on Development Cooperation
German Government and Federal States Programme
Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development
Council of European Regions and Municipalities
Civil society organisations
Development Assistance Committee
Decentralised development cooperation
German County Association
Association of German Cities
German Association of Towns and Municipalities
European Union
Gross domestic product
Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit
Gross national income
Local and regional governments
Partnership Projects for Sustainable Local Development
Conference of Federal State Prime Ministers
German section of CEMR
Official Development Aid
Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
Service Agency Communities in One World
United Nations
German Association of Local Public Utilities



Data

Form of state structure¹



Federal state

Territorial-administrative division²

16
federal states

294
rural districts (counties)

106 urban districts (towns)

10,753 municipalities (including 2,060 cities)

Population³

83,445,000
(2024)



Geographical size⁴

357,569 km²



GDP per Capita⁵

€51,833 (2024)
EU average: €37,600



EU membership⁶

since 1958



OECD DAC membership

since 1961



0.7
(UN target: 0.7)

ODA target as % GNI⁷



0.67
0.82
0.85

ODA target as % GNI in the last three years⁸



since 2020 first time **decreased**
under 0.7% in 2024

Trends in total ODA⁹



24

Seats¹⁰ in the European Committee of the Regions



4 (Association of German Cities – DST, German County Association – DLT, German section of CEMR – RGRE, German Association of Towns and Municipalities – DStGB))

CEMR members¹¹ in Germany

¹ Country Specifics, Local Government Str – Germany

² List of Municipalities Information System – German Federal Statistical Office

³ Germany – EU country profile | European Union

⁴ Germany – EU country profile | European Union

⁵ Gross domestic product (GDP) - German Federal Statistical Office

⁶ Germany – EU country profile | European Union

⁷ OECD Data Explorer • DAC1: Flows by provider (ODA+OOF+Private)

⁸ OECD Data Explorer • DAC1: Flows by provider (ODA+OOF+Private)

⁹ Deutschland bleibt 2024 unter dem UN-Finanzierungsziel für Entwicklungszusammenarbeit | BMZ

¹⁰ Germany | European Committee of the Regions

¹¹ National Associations – CEMR CCRE



1. Decentralised development cooperation (DDC) framework in Germany

1.1. Framework defining engagement in DDC

German development cooperation is not defined by a unique law (OECD 2023, p. 26). Instead, it is shaped by the political strategies and position papers of the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). German **development policy** is further oriented towards international agreements. Germany actively embraces the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, viewing it as a guiding principle for national policies and development cooperation. The localisation of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within Germany and with partners worldwide is a key aspect of German decentralised development cooperation (DDC). Additionally, federal government's administrative guidelines for financial and technical cooperation form a binding framework for the ministries involved in planning and implementing bilateral projects and programmes with the partner countries (BMZ, 2021). These guidelines, however, do not apply to DDC.

The BMZ highlighted the important role of LRGs as well as its commitment to support municipal development cooperation in a brochure-like publication '**Lokal handeln, Global wirken**' ('Local action, global impact', available in German only) released in 2023.

Although there is no overarching law or political strategy for DDC, the German Basic Law provides a legal basis for the engagement of subnational actors. The constitutional mandate to represent Germany's interests abroad and coordinate foreign relations lies with the federal government (**Article 32** of the Basic Law). The federal states can engage in international activities and development cooperation if they represent their own interests (OECD 2023, p.28) and can arrange international agreements, provided they fall within their legislative competencies and are agreed with the federal government (Article 32 of the Basic Law, also OECD 2023, pp. 26-28). The key for municipalities to engage in DDC is their constitutionally granted right to self-determination (Article 28 of the Basic Law), which allows them to participate in DDC activities on a voluntary basis. Municipalities are both permitted and encouraged to engage in development cooperation (OECD 2023, p. 28). There is no uniform definition of DDC, but DDC activities (including (municipal) partnerships

with LRGs and partners in the Global South, joint projects, peer learning, exchange of expertise within networks, and cooperation agreements) are counted as external development activities (OECD 2023, p.22).

Most federal states have set their own guidelines, including geographical and thematic priorities for DDC (see Chapter 2.3). It is intended and seen as a strength that municipalities determine their development cooperation activities independently and are not formally bound by the federal government's strategic objectives. More than 250 municipalities have signed a resolution on the 2030 Agenda, underlining their strong commitment towards the SDGs¹². Also, funding regulations and programmes influence their scope of action, as municipalities often rely on funding provided by the federal government (see Chapter 2.4).

1.2. Key actors involved in DDC

German development cooperation is organised through a multi-level governance approach, which allows actors at different levels of government (federal, federal state, and municipal) to shape and implement DDC activities.

Germany has a dedicated ministry for development policy, **the BMZ**, responsible for strategic planning and programming of development cooperation, bilateral and multilateral partnerships and cooperation, and the coordination of actors involved in DDC activities, including LRGs. The BMZ provides financial and technical resources through programmes and guidelines specifically targeted at regional and local levels. These programmes are supported on behalf of the BMZ by the Service Agency Communities in One World (SKEW) of Engagement Global and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), which cooperate with federal states and municipalities.

The SKEW of Engagement Global is the main advisory and grant-providing platform for German municipalities, cities, and districts interested in DDC activities. As such, it supports planning and implementation of DDC activities as well as international exchange of expertise and learning opportunities between municipalities. The SKEW organizes events as platforms for peer learning and exchange (study visits, workshops, conferences), provides advice (for project applications, strategies) and offers financial support to municipalities through **various programmes** (Interview, 30 April 2025). Since its creation in 2001, the SKEW is cooperating with the three German Local Government Associations, the federal states and other stakeholders of DDC.

The **GIZ** cooperates with the federal states via the **German Government and Federal States Programme (BLP)**, which supports the strategic alignment of their activities (OECD 2023, p.30). Additionally, the GIZ has a portfolio for supporting the municipal development cooperation (see Chapter 2.4), including with the German municipal associations. Moreover, the GIZ and the SKEW pool their expertise in joint projects, for example **the Expert Fund for Municipal Partnerships Worldwide** and **Connective Cities**.

At the federal state level, each state chancellery is responsible for development cooperation in most cases (Germany has 16 federal states with similar but not uniform government structures). In some cases, development cooperation is embedded in one or several ministries (OECD 2023, p. 31). Overall, the type of engagement as well as capacities and financial contributions for DDC activities differ between federal states. While all models share the federal states' coordinating role and efforts to secure funding, they differ in the degree of the direct exchange with local partners. Some federal states cooperate directly with their partner governments by providing financial support for the implementation of DDC activities. Often, they cooperate with civil society organisations (CSOs) as intermediaries and implementors in the partner

¹² For more details see: [Municipalities for Global Sustainability – SKEW](#)

country. City-states are usually involved in the peer-to-peer partnerships. Besides, federal states engage with the GIZ to finance projects in partner countries via the BLP (ibid., pp. 59-60).

Municipalities are mostly involved in knowledge and experience exchange and joint project implementation based on their specific tasks and competences in basic service delivery. Moreover, their know-how as well as proximity to citizens, makes them well informed about the local needs and challenges (OECD 2023, p. 32). Still, since DDC is a voluntary task, municipalities need to prioritize tasks and consider their financial and human resources capacities. DDC activities require continuous political will, a strong commitment of the administration and often depend on additional support and funding.

Many other actors play a role in DDC as well. Municipal associations (the Association of German Cities – DST, the Germany County Association – DLT, the German Association of Towns and Municipalities – DStGB, the German Association of Local Public Utilities – VKU) are important actors as they inform, support and advise municipalities, for example about the funding opportunities and partnerships (Interview, 5 May 2025). Moreover, as members of the CEMR and PLATFORMA, DST, DLT and DStGB advocate local interests and DDC at the EU level. Municipal companies are mostly involved in technical exchange, including utilities in the water and energy sector and waste management. The non-governmental actors, including churches, foundations, CSOs, scientific institutions and universities and the private sector engage in DDC activities as cooperation partners of the federal states and LRGs in implementing projects in the partner countries (OECD 2023, p. 32ff).

1.3. Coordination of DDC activities

DDC in Germany is influenced by its federal structure and multi-level-governance approach. This enables the federal government, the federal states, and municipalities to act independently but also requires coordination at various levels and between different actors.

Federal states coordinate their DDC activities using different mechanisms and tools, such as **development policy guidelines**, multi-stakeholder coordinating platforms (for example, the Council of Development Cooperation in Baden-Württemberg) or strategic political instruments (for example, memorandum of understanding in North Rhine-Westphalia). CSOs, the private sector, and other actors are involved via informal coordination formats (OECD 2023, p. 79).

The main institutionalised mechanism for coordination between *the federal states and the federal government* is the *Federal Government and Federal States Committee on Development Cooperation (BLA-EZ)*. The mentioned **BLP** further supports coherence of priorities and DDC activities in partner countries (see Chapter 2.4). Finally, horizontal coordination between federal states takes place via the Conference of Federal State Prime Ministers (MPK) (OECD 2023, p. 79).

The SKEW plays a key role in coordinating DDC activities at municipal level by co-financing projects and providing formats for exchange and networking (ibid., p. 80). Moreover, there is a shared platform **Advisory board for the further development of the municipal development policy programme**, composed of members from the BMZ, the SKEW, GIZ, municipalities, federal states, leading municipal associations and CSOs. The board's objective is to support and advise the SKEW and the BMZ on issues related to the further development of municipal development cooperation as well as to generate ideas and discuss current trends.

1.4. Specific programmes supporting DDC activities

There are different funding programmes for implementation of DDC activities in Germany. The financial resources are mainly provided by the BMZ and channelled through the SKEW and the GIZ. Federal states co-finance some DDC activities at the federal state level. The funding programmes for municipalities are mainly organised and provided by the SKEW.

The SKEW forms part of Engagement Global. **Engagement Global** is the central contact agency for various kinds of initiatives that support developmental work and is commissioned by the Federal Government and funded by the BMZ. It provides information, consultation and financial support in the development policy sector for individuals, civil society, municipalities, foundations and stakeholders from the educational and economic sector.

Operating within the Engagement Global, the SKEW is a central institution for supporting and funding DDC activities at the municipal level. Financed by the BMZ, the SKEW designs and implements various programmes for enabling and strengthening municipal engagement in development cooperation. For example, the **Fund for Small-Scale Municipal Development Cooperation Projects** supports partnership projects by providing between EUR 1000-20,000 for projects implemented in Germany, and up to EUR 50,000 for projects implemented with partner municipalities from the Global South. Recently, the programme has been extended to support municipal partnerships in regions affected by crises to strengthen municipal solidarity and address emergencies. Next, the funding programme **Partnership Projects for Sustainable Local Development (Nakopa)** supports municipal partnerships in developing joint projects, implemented in the partner municipality. Participating municipalities can receive up to EUR 100,000 for projects of 24 months, and up to EUR 250,000 for projects between 24 and 36 months. Thematic areas range from sustainable services, good local governance to climate change mitigation and adaptation.

Other SKEW programmes support municipal partnerships with a specific regional focus. Examples include the **Municipal Partnerships with Ukraine**, the **Municipal Cooperation Maghreb-Germany** (in cooperation with the GIZ), the **ORTAK** – German Turkish initiative (not financed by the BMZ), and the *Partnerships with Municipalities in the Palestine Territories*. Additionally, the SKEW provides support for enhancing municipal capacities to engage in development cooperation, for example through the **funding for a staff position**.

At the federal level, the SKEW's pilot initiative Local Governance Exchange supports **partnership** between North Rhine-Westphalia and Ghana (training courses, professional advice, networking meetings, access to funding opportunities) and the **partnership** between the Rhineland-Palatinate and Rwanda (facilitating exchange between municipalities and institutions and implementing joint projects within the 2030 Agenda).

At the federal state level, the GIZ initiative **the German Government and Federal States Programme (BLP)**, implemented on behalf of the BMZ, supports collaboration between the federal states and the federal government. The programme seeks to align competencies and expertise of the federal level with the strategic priorities of the BMZ's bilateral development cooperation. Thematic areas range from sustainable economic development and good governance to environment, climate and energy (OECD 2023, p. 42). The programme is co-funded by the BMZ and the federal states. Different activities are part of the programme, usually depending on the project (for example, the training courses or peer-to-peer exchange).

The GIZ has programmes for municipalities as well. For example, the [utility platform](#) facilitates partnerships between municipal utilities and exchanges of technical know-how, especially in the water sector, waste management and circular economy. Furthermore, the project [Supporting civil protection and reconstruction in municipal partnerships](#) provides support for the existing solidarity partnerships between the German and Ukrainian municipalities, for example by advising German municipalities on the logistics of forwarding supplies to the Ukrainian partners. The project [Supporting municipal development cooperation worldwide](#) offers advisory services, connects municipal expertise in Germany and Europe, and supports cooperation on DDC with CEMR and OECD.

There is a joint GIZ – SKEW programme, the [Experts Fund for municipal partnerships worldwide](#), which supports municipal capacity building and deploys experts to partner municipalities in the Global South in support of project implementation. Also, the international network [Connective Cities](#), jointly managed with the DST and the SKEW, provides a platform for peer learning, exchanges and promotion of cooperation between municipalities and cities worldwide.

1.5. Modalities, activities, and focus areas of DDC

The BMZ, federal states, and municipalities pursue their own strategic and geographical priorities. While their priorities partly complement each other, they also reflect individual interests and scopes of action.

According to the [BMZ 2030](#), German bilateral development cooperation focuses on five core topics, including peace keeping, food security, the promotion of training and sustainable growth, climate and energy, health as well as the protection of the environment and natural resources. These are complemented by further topics, such as digitalization and promotion of sustainable value chains (BMZ 2020, p.4). The BMZ mainly maintained geographical focus of development cooperation of previous years, although it put forward different types of strategic partnerships with the partner countries (bilateral partnerships for joint development cooperation as well as transformation partnerships; global partnerships, focusing on joint solutions for global challenges; and strategic partnerships for advocating peace in regions erupted by crises and migration) (ibid., p. 5).

At the federal state level, each federal state sets its own prioritised policy areas of cooperation. Some similarities still exist, since these commonly align with federal states' competencies. They mostly include education, climate and environment, and health (OECD 2023, p.37). Moreover, the OECD study (2023, pp.37-38) showed that federal states' DDC activities and projects tend to focus on networking and transfer of technology and knowledge, often combined with the educational measures. As for the geographical focus, the study (ibid., pp. 47-48) indicated different factors playing a role, such as the political ambition, global challenges, recommendations from the partner organisations, and the existence of long-term partnerships.

Turning to the municipal level, the same study (OECD 2023, p. 44) showed that DDC priority areas tend to focus on education and climate change as well as governance, democracy, social inclusion, and urban development. Climate partnerships are important as they often serve as a starting point for further cooperation. The strategic focus and policy areas are based on the municipal competencies and expertise (ibid., p. 46). DDC activities mostly include establishing networks, peer-to-peer learning, and exchanging technology and know-how (ibid., p. 39). Geographically, the focus of municipal DDC activities is usually

influenced by historical and political reasons with the long-term municipal partnerships often in place (ibid., p.52). Other relevant factors include cultural reasons, global challenges, and recently, a specific regional focus on Ukraine due to the Russian war of aggression with new solidarity partnerships being established in a short amount of time.

Overall, while federal states and municipalities define and pursue their own goals and priorities of cooperation, certain thematic and strategic similarities have emerged across levels. The OECD study (2023, p. 55) highlighted an orientational tendency towards the SDGs, especially in federal states' DDC approaches. Moreover, both federal states and municipalities cooperate with a broad range of partner countries. According to the OECD (2023, p.48), they implemented ODA-financed projects in 76 of 142 ODA-eligible countries and territories in 2020. Finally, development cooperation at both levels typically takes place through a mix of partnerships (municipal partnerships, city-to-city cooperation) and multi-stakeholder arrangements involving civil society, academia, and private actors.

1.6. Financial scheme for DDC

Public funding for development cooperation, including DDC activities, is allocated through the federal budget. The BMZ oversees financial resources and plans distribution to different actors and programmes. This enables the BMZ to set strategic priorities and steer development policy activities via funding guidelines. In 2024, the BMZ had around EUR 11.22 billion at its disposal. The share for civic, municipal, and economic engagement accounted for 11.7 % of the total **BMZ budget** last year, which corresponds to around EUR 1.31 billion.

At the federal state level, co-financing arrangements with other actors are common, for example as part of the BLP. Since federal states' overall engagement in development cooperation depends on their own available funds, there are differences between them. For example, the OECD study (2023, p. 35) showed that Baden-Württemberg, Bavaria, Hamburg, and North Rhine-Westphalia provided more than 75% of total German subnational ODA between 2018 and 2020. Financial resources for municipalities are mainly provided by the SKEW through different programmes (see Chapter 2.3).

LRGs in Germany have the highest contribution in absolute terms to overall ODA, compared to other OECD DAC members (OECD 2023, p. 35). Additionally, there has been an increase in the share of ODA provided by the German LRGs in absolute terms during the last decade. Although Germany reports DCC in terms of ODA since 2020, the expenditure of the federal states is documented but there is no systematic recording of expenditure on DDC activities at municipal level (ibid., p. 14). Finally, it is important to note that there has been a decline in Germany's overall ODA contributions and further budget cuts for humanitarian aid and development cooperation are expected (CONCORD 2024, p. 47, 68). The federal government **announced** cuts in development cooperation, which will also affect the DDC.

2. Enabling factors for DDC and future developments

There are several important enabling factors facilitating DDC in Germany. The German federal structure wherein LRGs already act as independent actors in other policy areas, and the multi-level governance approach, enabling involvement of actors at different levels of government as well as access to different resources, knowledge and expertise, provide overall conducive framework for the DDC.

Moreover, having the SKEW as the agency focused specifically on supporting German municipalities is pivotal (Interview, 5 May 2025) as it helps addressing specific needs and accommodating diverse existing municipal contexts according to their requirements and interests (Interview, 30 April 2025). Linked to this are also numerous available programmes supporting implementation of DDC activities. These programmes enable municipalities to access the policy field of DDC in different ways and facilitate realisation of DDC projects.

The established long-term partnerships between German federal states and municipalities and their counterparts in the partner countries play an important role as they facilitate cooperation and generate activities with sustainable impact (Interview, 12 May 2025). Oftentimes, the initially established DDC partnerships by the federal/regional level are followed by the greater municipal engagement with the partner country's LRGs (Interview, 5 May 2025).

Recent German-Ukrainian solidarity partnerships that emerged following the outbreak of the Russian war of aggression are significant as well. Not only these partnerships draw attention to DDC as an important instrument within German development cooperation policy but also demonstrate direct impact and flexibility of municipal support in times of need. Considering increasing global development challenges, DDC format might thus play a valuable role within Germany's strategic objectives of supporting peacebuilding, democracy, good governance and the rule of law. In this regard, DDC could be used more strategically to complement existing bilateral and multilateral development cooperation (Interview, 14 May 2025).

Additionally, the intensified municipal cooperation focusing on Ukraine brought to the fore triangular partnerships, for example between the German, Polish and Ukrainian LRGs (Interview, 30 April 2025, see also Kaminski & Matiaszczyk 2025). Drawing from these experiences, further development of trilateral or multilateral partnerships will be important in the future. In this regard, it would be useful to share more information and raise awareness of activities of LRGs from different EU countries, and assess opportunities for cooperation (Interview, 30 April 2025).

Several challenges for DDC in Germany can be identified as well. Current political developments, sceptical public opinion towards development cooperation as well as decreasing funding and challenging access to funding opportunities might have an impact on the scope of German DDC (Interviews 5, 12, and 14 May 2025). According to preliminary OECD calculations, Germany will fall short of the UN target of allocating 0.7% of gross national income (GNI) to development cooperation for the first time since 2020 (BMZ, 2024b), and the budgetary cuts are expected (CONCORD, 2024). Overall, such context can constrain effective DDC work and require strong justification for any related activities (Interview 5 May 2015, Interview 12 May 2025).

Another challenge for the DDC engagement is related to limited financial and human resources capacities of German municipalities (Interview 30 April 2025, Interview 14 May 2025), especially the smaller ones (interview 5 May 2025). Development policy commitments are voluntary tasks that require financing and available personnel to realise DDC projects and activities, while there are other tasks and obligations at the same time. Many municipalities and federal states, therefore, (partly) depend on the federal government (funding) support. With increasing financial and personnel pressures, municipalities might face challenges in continuing to play an active role in development policy.

Furthermore, there is still no comprehensive strategy for involving local businesses/companies in DDC activities and partnerships, despite the great potential (Interview 30 April 2025, Interview 12 May 2025). Partnerships between municipalities could be utilised more for the business involvement, bringing added value to the DDC projects. While some German municipalities are adopting such approach, there is still no widespread practice of connecting businesses and DDC.

Finally, on a more structural level of the German DDC framework, two aspects should be mentioned. First, further strengthening of the coordination between and involvement of actors at different levels would be beneficial. This especially concerns the coordination between federal states and municipalities as they largely organise their activities independently. Next, there is a need for more municipal involvement in DDC in a systematic and active way (Interview, May 14, 2025). Second, for greater harmonization, the alignment of LRGs activities with the SDGs could be useful, which some are already using for orientation (OECD, 2023). Importantly, preparation of SDGs strategies/voluntary reports oftentimes creates initiative for establishing DDC partnerships or projects (Interview, 30 April 2025). Similar trend can be observed with the fair trade/procurement initiative. Specifically, in the process of developing sustainable strategies, increasing opportunities arise for establishing partnerships and for integrating fair trade principles into support to municipalities within DDC projects (ibid.).



3. Conclusions

Overall, Germany is one of the largest providers of ODA, and German LRGs have the highest contribution in absolute terms to overall ODA, compared to other OECD DAC members (OECD 2023). Two elements of the German framework stand out. First, the multi-level governance approach which characterises DDC activities in Germany. This approach allows the interplay of programmes according to the competencies and interests of LRGs in line with the objectives of the federal government. Such framework provides opportunities to engage in DCC activities at different levels, including municipalities, which have competencies and know-how to share through partnerships and cooperation with their counterparts internationally.

Second, the German case stands out by having a dedicated institution to support the DDC, the SKEW of Engagement Global as well as a variety of programmes for the DDC, funded by the BMZ. The SKEW of Engagement Global plays a key role in supporting LRGs in the form of advice, appropriate funding instruments, and projects implementation and monitoring. By cooperating with the GIZ, further synergies emerge, for example from the coordination of the development programmes. Finally, the available variety of DDC funding opportunities are designed for specific purposes, and thus enable implementation of project-related, thematically focused cooperation as well as the formation of long-term partnerships which align with the municipal self-determination as a key prerequisite for DDC activities.

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