German goals, global focus

Can universal values such as solidarity and justice be compatible with national interests — or are they inevitably at odds with each other?

In the section on economic cooperation and development in the coalition agreement between the CDU/CSU and SPD, it states that German development policy is guided by both values and interests. For those who have long been committed to a proactive development policy, this statement contains two encouraging messages. For one thing, an independent development policy will be maintained. Development policy perspectives and expertise will continue to be represented at the cabinet table and will not be subordinated to foreign policy interests. At the same time, the well-known conflict between value-based and interest-driven politics has been defused by a compromise: it is recognised that development policy, insofar as it deals with reducing global inequalities, is inherently based on universal values such as solidarity and justice. This is balanced by the acknowledgement that national policy – even if it is universal in its orientation – cannot ignore the interests of its own population.

However, it remains unclear what specific values and interests are at stake. Only a more detailed definition of these would make it possible to assess the extent to which they are compatible. It is striking that the values mentioned in the coalition agreement hardly make any prominent mention of the classic humanitarian goals of development policy, such as global justice and the creation of decent material living conditions through the elimination of extreme poverty and hunger. All that is formulated is a lip-service commitment to combating poverty, hunger and inequality and the intention to work towards an ‘ambitious post-Agenda 2030 framework’.

Given the glaring shortcomings in achieving the targets – such as the Sustainable Development Goal ‘Zero Hunger’ by 2030 – this seems rather unambitious. Instead, the focus is clearly on political human rights: democracy, the rule of law, gender equality, sexual and reproductive self-determination, and the strengthening of civil society are particularly emphasised. One could say that today‘s canon of values is

more about the global spread of freedom and participation than about liberation from material hardship.

More pragmatism

Since the beginnings of German development aid, the country's own national interests have always played a role. The words of SPD Minister Hans-Jürgen Wischnewski from the 1966-1969 grand coalition still ring true today: 'With our development aid, we are creating jobs in Germany.' An explicit tie to exports was intended to benefit the German export industry. In the early decades, development policy was also shaped by the Hallstein Doctrine, which aimed to prevent international recognition of the GDR.

By the oil crisis of 1973 at the latest, securing raw materials had become a priority — even though Minister Erhard Eppler sought to pursue a more value-oriented policy. Later, under Heidemarie Wieczorek-Zeul, the concept of 'enlightened self-interest' became established: the focus was not on short-term export gains, but on long-term increases in prosperity in partner countries — understood as 'tomorrow's markets'. Germany's interest in peaceful, stable neighbourhoods, global environmental protection and combating the causes of migration also gained in importance.

Development policy is increasingly interpreted as an instrument for pursuing short- to medium-term interests — in particular as an element of geopolitical soft power.

The 2025 coalition agreement refers to self-interest in a new way. In general terms, it speaks of foreign, security and economic policy interests. Greater emphasis is placed on geopolitical motives: good relations with the countries of the Global South are to be cultivated in view of growing systemic rivalries with China and Russia. At the same time, traditional interests such as securing raw materials, promoting exports and protecting investments remain intact.

The announced awarding of contracts to companies from Germany and the EU in the context of development cooperation makes this particularly clear. The use of development cooperation as a 'key lever for migration management' is also emphasised. It is noteworthy, however, that the long-standing argument that development policy also pursues long-term self-interests in solving global challenges is no longer explicitly mentioned. Although contributions to international climate finance and biodiversity protection are still planned, the underlying rationale appears to be much more pragmatic. Development policy is increasingly

interpreted as an instrument for pursuing short- to medium-term interests — in particular as an element of geopolitical soft power.

This development raises the fundamental question of how sustainable the postulated balance of values and interests actually is. Can universal values such as solidarity, justice and sustainability be compatible with national interests — or are they inevitably at odds with each other? In theory, self-interest is legitimate as long as it does not contradict declared values and goals. Conversely, values only have a real chance if they do not jeopardise fundamental self-interests. In addition, different values and interests can compete with each other, both individually and in relation to one another.

Prioritising material human rights

The choice of partner countries is a good example of this: Should preference be given to countries that stand out for their effective poverty reduction, good governance and social inclusion — even if they are ruled by authoritarian regimes? Or is it preferable to work with formally democratic countries where clientelist elites dominate politics and structural poverty is hardly tackled? The international community has declared the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger to be priority goals. This makes it necessary to give priority to the realisation of material human rights — even if this means cooperating with authoritarian regimes. From an ethical perspective, the argument of global responsibility for poverty and climate change also argues in favour of aligning development policy measures more closely with existential needs than with political ideals.

Conflicts can also arise between short-term and long-term self-interests. For example, those who focus on promoting exports today may hinder the development of a productive local economy in Africa — and thus destroy tomorrow's markets themselves. German companies that invest in labour-intensive sectors but tend to replace rather than create jobs there are promoting migration instead of combating its causes. There is no such thing as *one* German (or European) interest. Rather, it is the political negotiation process that determines whose interests are enforced.

Soft power requires trust, not lecturing.

What is striking in this context is the absence of any discussion in the coalition agreement of a key policy area: the interaction between trade and development policy. Although the African Free Trade Area is mentioned, there is no mention of European trade agreements with

countries in the Global South. There is no mention of developing these agreements in a way that is conducive to development, for example through asymmetries or environmental standards. This reveals a glaring gap in the relationship between self-interest and global responsibility.

At the same time, it can be problematic when democratic values conflict with geostrategic interests. Those who take an overly moral stance towards non-democratic partners risk political destabilisation and diplomatic failure. Friendships are difficult to build when moral finger-pointing dominates. Soft power requires trust, not lecturing.

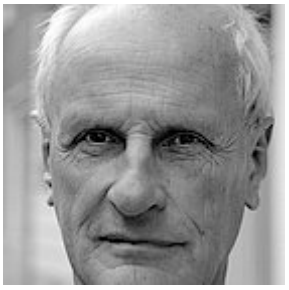
However, there is one area in which our self-interest can be reconciled with humanist values. This is particularly evident in the link between development policy goals such as poverty and hunger reduction and our long-term interests in world peace, political stability – especially in neighbouring regions of the world – combating the causes of migration (insofar as this relates to prospects for life in the regions of origin), stabilising the environment and climate, and developing future markets. Only a development policy that succeeds in providing stable employment for the large number of underemployed people who struggle daily for their material existence can counteract the urge to resolve conflicts by force. This is the only way to undermine the growing militancy, warlords and war-based economic structures.

A development policy that specifically creates jobs is in the interests of Germany as a whole.

Securing food and income for all creates the conditions for political stability and prevents people from resorting to inhumane forms of earning a living due to a lack of alternatives. People who are given the opportunity to process the fruits of economic growth in their own home region, rather than being forced to take the dangerous route across the Mediterranean, are more likely to stay. And only where industrial value chains emerge will there be long-term demand for German machinery. Good, trusting relationships with partner countries can also be built more sustainably if we do not relentlessly demand free access to their domestic markets, but work together to provide productive employment for dissatisfied sections of the population. A development policy that specifically creates jobs is in the

interests of Germany as a whole.

However, a development policy that does not make serious efforts to eliminate poverty and hunger (Sustainability Goals 1 and 2) not only damages the credibility of our values, but also our own interest in a more peaceful and sustainable world order.



Theo Rauch
Berlin

Theo Rauch is an adjunct professor at the Centre for Development Studies at the Institute of Geography at the Free University of Berlin. His work in development policy has focused on the possibilities and limitations of interventions in international development cooperation.

-