



## IN BRIEF 7:

# GERMAN DECISIONMAKERS' ATTITUDES TOWARD DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

WHAT DRIVES DECISIONMAKERS' ATTITUDES AND ENGAGEMENT WITH GLOBAL POVERTY?

Soomin Oh, Jennifer Hudson & David Hudson

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*The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the fragile progress towards the Global Goals means that understanding decisionmakers' support for development cooperation is more important than ever. This In Brief reports the results of a comprehensive survey of German decisionmakers conducted in 2021.*

Previous research on politics of development has recognised that the interests and goals of donor governments matter for development outcomes ([Milner and Tingley 2010](#); [Dietrich 2016](#)), and more recently, the role of preferences of individual

actors or leaders has been highlighted as playing a key role in development cooperation ([Dreher, Nunnenkamp and Schmaljohann 2015](#); [Heinrich and Peterson 2020](#)). Given the importance of decisionmakers' preferences, our survey – developed in cooperation with German development organisations – seeks to understand decisionmakers' media consumption and their attitudes towards development cooperation.

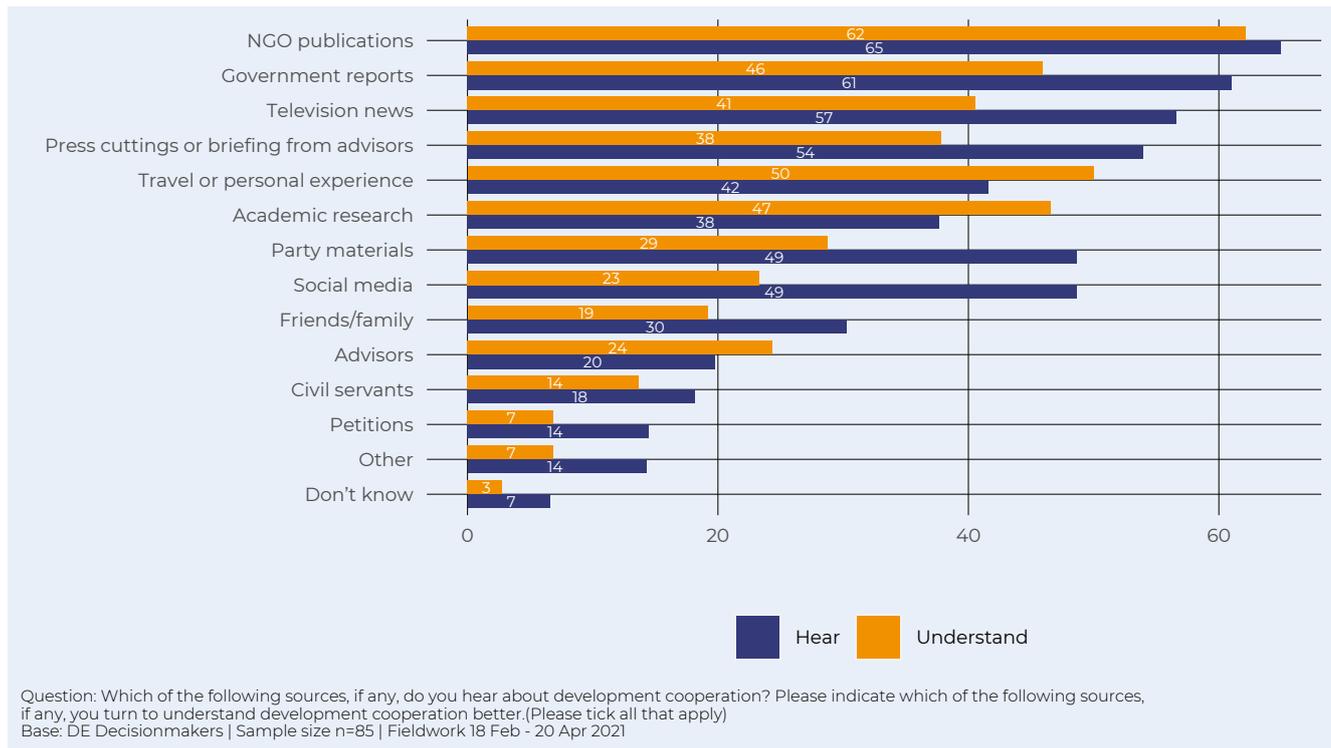
The results suggest that German decisionmakers are mostly focussed on newspapers and TV as their main source of international news; but that they turn to NGO reports, personal experience and academic research when they want to understand development issues

better. German decisionmakers are willing to spend more on

### KEY INSIGHTS

- Newspapers and television are decisionmakers' top source of international news.
- NGO reports are viewed as the most helpful source for understanding development issues.
- There is a high degree of trust and value for NGOs and their advice, especially amongst MPs' staffers and BMZ officials.
- The issue every MP said they talk to their constituents about: refugees and migration.

## FIGURE 1: SOURCES OF INFORMATION



development cooperation and to anchor 0.7% in the coalition agreement but place low priority on ODA relative to other areas of government spending. Finally, there is a high degree of trust and value for NGOs and their advice, but these results are driven by the staffers and the BMZ officials, with lower degree of trust and value from the MPs.

The survey was conducted between 16 February – 20 April 2021. We collected responses from members of the Bundestag, their staffers, and BMZ officials, with 85 responses in total. The survey covers three key areas: what are the main sources of German decisionmakers' media consumption? (2) What are their attitudes and opinions towards development cooperation and issues? And (3) what determines whether German decisionmakers get behind a cause or campaign? In this In Brief, we unpack the results from the decisionmaker survey and draw out insights for the

development sector.

### MEDIA CONSUMPTION

Where do German decisionmakers get their information from? Which sources do they pay more attention to?

Decisionmakers get their information from a range of sources. When asked to identify their top three sources of international news the most frequently selected source was newspapers (with 79% choosing it). Public service television (55%) and radio (40%) were second and third, with social media at fourth (33%). Email (27%), social messaging apps (27%), podcasts (16%) and blogs (11%) rounded out the list. The full results are provided in tables in the appendix. It is clear that established and traditional sources

still dominate decisionmakers' attention. While social media is often thought to be king, it is a top-three source of international news for a third of German decisionmakers in our sample.

We followed this up by asking respondents to name specific outlets or platforms they used to keep up with international news, providing them with a mixed list of the most popular TV channels, newspapers, social media platforms. In this case, the top two sources were Der Spiegel (67%) and ARD (65%). Looking further down the list, it is striking that Google (41%) and Twitter (40%) came

**NGO publications rank first for both hearing about, and in getting a better understanding of development issues**

ninth and tenth respectively. Again, this suggests that while social and new media does matter, it's the newspapers and television channels that remain the main sources for German decisionmakers.

•**Newspapers:** There was a relatively close number of top choices of newspapers, Der Tagesspiegel ranking first, with 55% of the decisionmakers reading the news outlet. This was followed closely by Der Speigel (52%), Süddeutsche Zeitung (52%), Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (51%), Die Zeit (50%), all being read by half or more of our decisionmaker respondents.

•**TV:** Two channels dominated the watching habits of German decisionmakers, with 67% and 62% of the respondents saying that they watched ARD and ZDF, respectively. The only other channel to register over 50% was Pheonix (with 51%).

•**Radio:** The most listened to station was SWR3 with 12% of respondents selecting it. Importantly, 47% of the decisionmakers stated that they do not listen to the radio. This is in contrast to the earlier question where 40% of respondents said that radio was their top source of international news.

•**Social media:** We asked decisionmakers which social networking platforms they used. The top four were Whatsapp (90%), Facebook (80%), Instagram (65%), and Twitter (63%).

## RESOURCES FOR UNDERSTANDING DEVELOPMENT

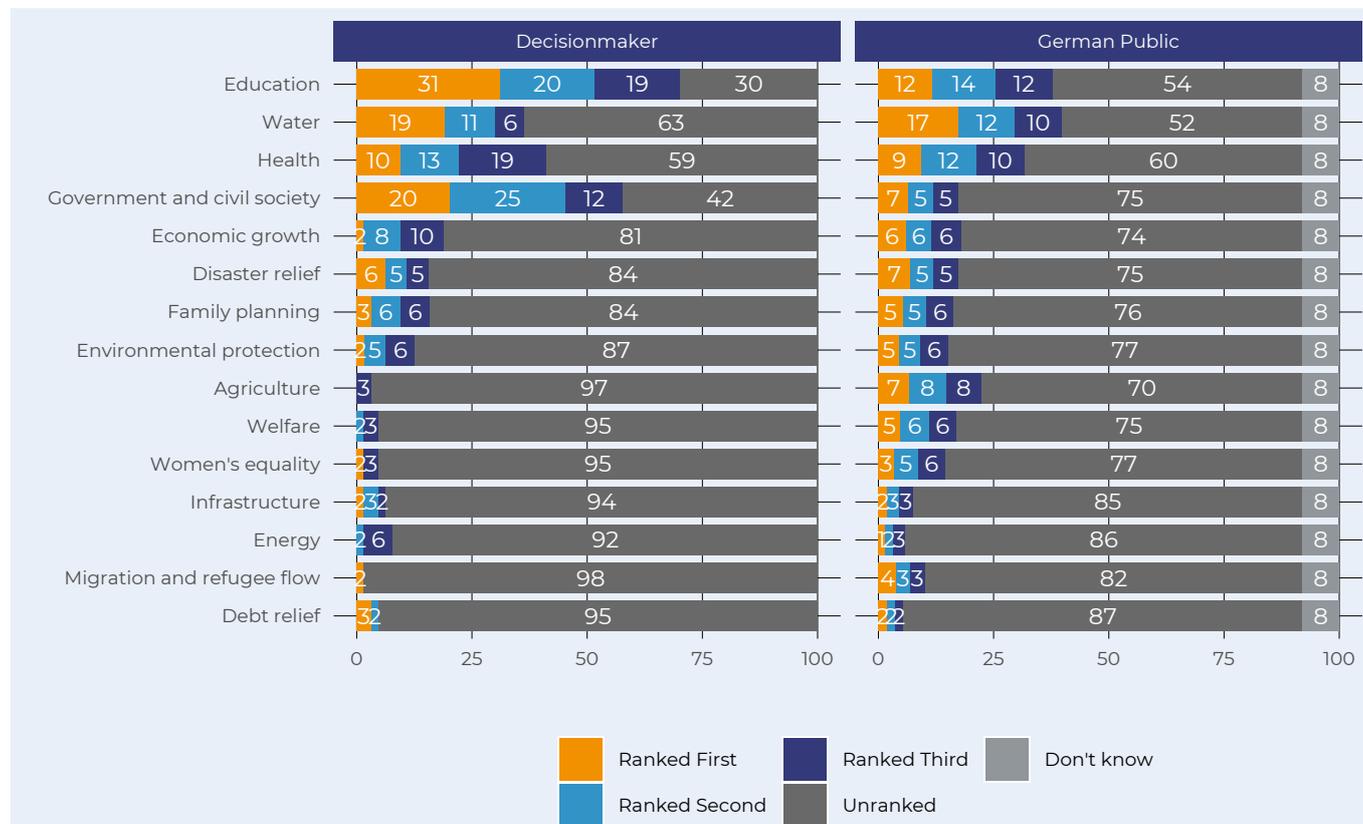
Next, we wanted to understand whether there are any differences in where decisionmakers hear about development issues and where they proactively go in order to

better understand development issues. The results are shown to the left in Figure 1. The key findings are that NGO publications rank first for both hearing about, and in getting a better understanding of development issues: 62% and 65% of decisionmakers hear and understand about development cooperation through NGO publications.

As a source for hearing about development cooperation, travel or personal experience ranked second (50%), followed by academic research (47%). For understanding development cooperation, government reports ranked second (61%), followed by TV news (57%). Petitions ranked the lowest as a source for hearing about (7%) and understanding (14%) the issue.

There are some striking differences in the usage of some sources that are important to highlight.

## FIGURE 2: SECTOR COMPARISON



Question: When it comes to government development cooperation for poor countries, what areas do you think are most important, second most important and third most important? Drag your selections onto the numbered boxes on the left to classify the three main areas.  
 Base (left): DE Decisionmakers | Sample size n=85 | Fieldwork 18 Feb - 20 Apr 2021  
 Base (right): DE Adults | Sample size n=6,000 | Fieldwork 10 Sept - 13 Oct 2020

In particular, 49% of the decisionmakers use social media to hear about development cooperation, but only 23% use it to understand the issue. Party materials are also characterised by this large gap between hearing versus understanding, and press cuttings and briefings from advisors, television news, and government reports are all more often used to hear about development cooperation, rather than understand it.

These results suggest that NGO publications, travel and personal experience, and academic research are worth investment. Such experiences and resources are worth cultivating by those in the sector to support decisionmakers taking more informed positions and decisions. The importance of travel and personal experience is particularly interesting, and this aligns with research in the UK about the importance of developing a party culture of engagement ([Beswick and Hjort, 2019](#)).

## ATTITUDES TOWARD DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

What do decisionmakers think about development cooperation, and how does it rank among other priority areas in terms of spending? Our findings show that there are big differences between decisionmakers' attitudes towards development cooperation itself and policy priorities. This is useful for putting stated support for development cooperation in context.

Why is development cooperation important for Germany? 74% of decisionmakers consider development cooperation to be in the national interest and 70% say it benefits Germany's leadership

and reputation in the world. Importantly, over 80% of decisionmakers think it's important to help developing countries, and 62% want to increase the budget for development cooperation. These positive views also extend to the longstanding 0.7% aid target, with almost half of the decisionmakers surveyed saying they would like to see it anchored in the coalition agreement.

Despite the support for development cooperation, the relative positioning of the issue compared to other foreign and domestic policies suggests that it is important to keep these views in context. When asked to rank 20 areas of government spending, ODA fell in the bottom third, with just 4% of the decisionmakers prioritising ODA as an area of government spending. What this suggests is that while development cooperation is considered important and in the interests of Germany, it is not a priority relative to other areas of government policies. This may not come as a big surprise, but serves as an important reminder of the competitive policy environment that development cooperation operates in.

We also asked decisionmakers to prioritise different areas of development cooperation, the same question we asked the German public in a nationally representative survey, revealing substantial differences between decisionmakers' and the public's priorities (Figure 2).

- Decisionmakers' top three priorities for the decisionmakers are education, government and civil society, and health.
- The German public's top three are



**Campaigns that frame the national interest or the moral case are no more or less likely to get support.**

water, education, and health.

It is striking that the highest priority for decisionmakers is government and civil society, as this ranks low for the public. Government and civil society – which includes corruption, government, and bureaucratic capacity issues – are important for the public, but these data suggest that there could be a useful space to develop a conversation between decisionmakers and the public: can decisionmakers make a better case to the public for the importance of governance issues – given their centrality to development outcomes, as well as listen and respond to public preferences.

Beyond decisionmakers' opinions on development cooperation as a sector, we also asked their opinions towards actors in the sector – especially NGOs. The encouraging news is that over 70% of the decisionmakers trust NGOs and value their advice. There are nuances to this: When opinions are broken down by role, i.e. MPs, staffers, and BMZ officials, there are large variations across the three groups. Only 39% of MPs trust NGOs themselves, but 54% trust the advice/information provided by the NGOs. This is compared to 75% of the BMZ officials and 78% staffers who trust NGOs, and 100% of BMZ officials and 75% of staffers who value their advice. This suggests that there is more work to be done with respect to building trust between MPs and NGOs. Maybe their staffers are a key intermediary

here.

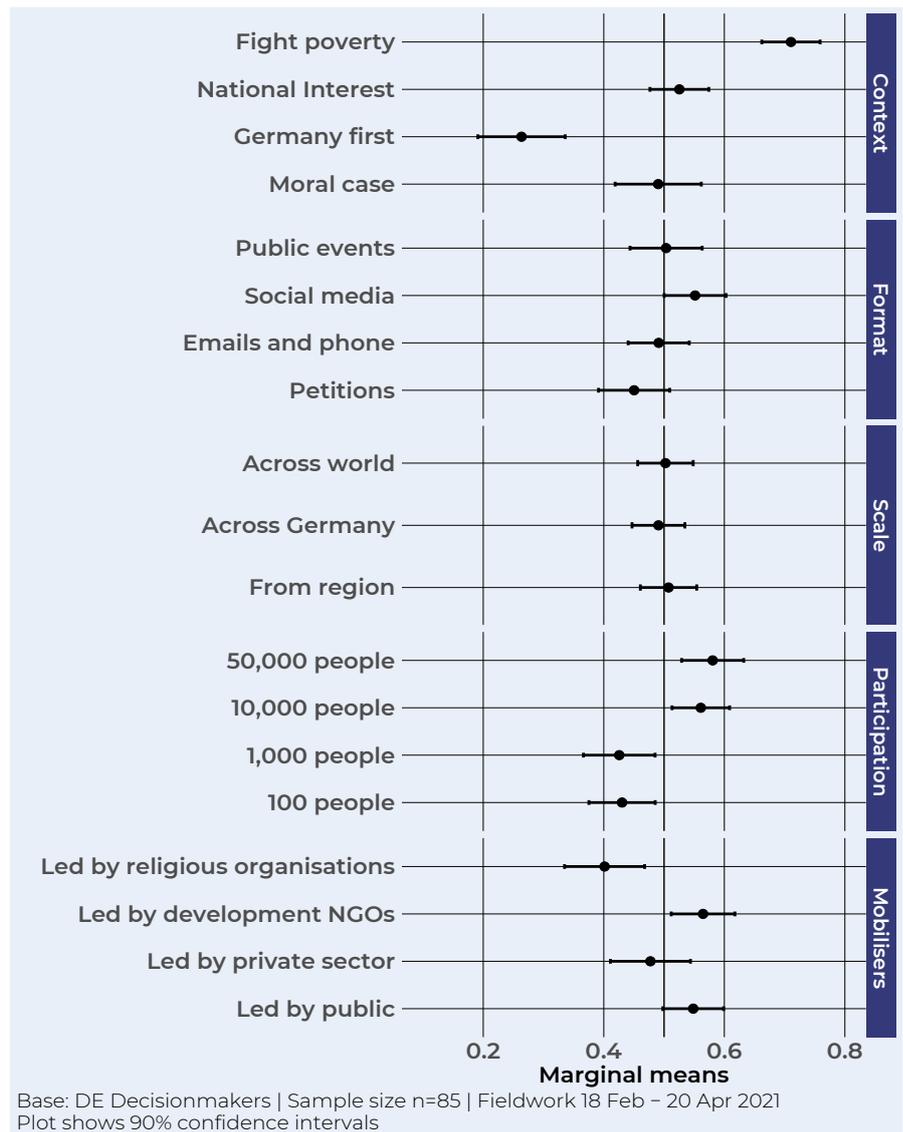
## GETTING BEHIND A CAUSE

Lastly, we conducted a survey experiment to understand what leads the decisionmakers to get behind a cause. We use a conjoint experiment which allows parcelling of the precise dimensions that drive the decisionmakers to take up a cause. In practice, this means that decisionmakers were shown two campaigns side by side and asked which one was more likely to get their support. Each of the campaigns varied across five dimensions:

- What was the framing of the campaign? Was it in support of development cooperation in order to fight poverty, because it is in the national interest, because it is the morally right thing to do, or indeed was the campaign against development cooperation because domestic issues should be prioritised?
- What was the format of the campaign? Primarily through social media, petitions, public events, or emails and phone calls?
- What was the scale of the campaign? Was it a local campaign? A national one? Or a global campaign including but also beyond Germany?
- How big was the campaign? How many people were involved? From 100 people up to 50,000 people?
- Finally, who was leading the campaign? The public, religious organisations, development NGOs, or the private sector?

These levels were randomly allocated to create two hypothetical campaigns and respondents were asked to indicate their preferred campaign five times. This allowed us to estimate the relative importance of each dimension and which of the levels

**FIGURE 3: CONJOINT**



resulted in more or less support. The results are shown in Figure 3. The further to the right of the vertical line a level is the more positive an effect it had on decisionmakers' choices, and further to left indicates that the level made it less likely that a campaign was preferred. If the confidence intervals cross the 0.5 vertical line it means that the level made no significant difference to the probability that a campaign featuring that characteristic was selected.

The results suggest that if a campaign is framed as fighting poverty it is significantly more likely to get backing from a decisionmaker. And, campaigns that are against development cooperation are much

less likely to be selected. Finally, campaigns that frame supporting development cooperation in terms of the national interest or the moral case are no more or less likely to get support.

The channel that a campaign uses doesn't make a difference for decisionmakers, and it doesn't appear to matter whether a campaign is local, national, or global. It does matter, however, how large a campaign is. There is a tipping point between 1,000 and 10,000 people where a campaign goes from less likely to more likely getting decisionmaker support. Finally, a campaign which is led by development NGOs is significantly

more likely to get support from decisionmakers.

These results suggest a clear preference for framing campaigns as fighting poverty, getting a sufficient number of people involved, and NGO leadership in order to motivate decisionmakers to support campaigns.

## CONCLUSION

This In Brief has detailed the landscape of German decisionmakers' media consumption, attitudes and preferences with respect to development cooperation. A number of key insights emerge.

Traditional media channels, such as television and newspapers, are still the most important source for decisionmakers. Social media remains a minority source for decisionmakers. This suggests that while inventive social media campaigns are affordable and attractive, there is still a lot of value in trying to help shape the development cooperation information and news in traditional media channels, while recognising that this is a harder thing to do.

It is good news for development NGOs that they are seen as the go to place for decisionmakers to gain a better understanding of development issues, along with academic research and personal experience. These suggest that development NGOs can make

sure that they offer decisionmakers the information and experience they seek.

Support for development cooperation is clear and positive, and there is majority support for the 0.7% target. But – as ever – this needs to be kept in the context of the relative importance of domestic and other policy priorities. It is also striking that decisionmaker and public preferences for what ODA should be spent on differ. This suggests a potentially productive dialogue between decisionmakers and the public. The findings also suggest that there is more work to be done with respect to building trust between MPs and NGOs. Yet, as trust is especially high for staffers, this is clearly the right and most useful pathway to MPs.

Finally, using an experiment, we show that decisionmakers are most likely to back campaigns that are framed in terms of fighting poverty, have greater public support and are led by development NGOs. Taken together these findings offer a new evidence base for how the public and development organisations can seek to collaborate and partner with German decisionmakers around development cooperation issues.

## BASIS FOR ANALYSIS:

Fieldwork was conducted in Germany with a sample of German decisionmakers - MPs, staffers, and BMZ officials (n = 85) - using Qualtrics. The fieldwork was conducted between 16 February - 20 April 2021. Photo by Sophia Lukasch.

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or by contacting  
[del@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:del@ucl.ac.uk)

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