

Principled Payer, but Purposeful Player?

International
perceptions of German
humanitarian action
and their implications
for Germany's
strategic capacities

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CENTRE FOR
HUMANITARIAN
ACTION

List of Abbreviation

BMZ	Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development	IHL	International Humanitarian Law
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa	INGO	International non-governmental organisation
CBPF	Country-Based Pooled Funds	IOM	International Organization for Migration
CDCS	Centre de crise et de soutien / Crisis and Support Centre	KfW	Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau
CERF	Central Emergency Response Fund	NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
CHA	Centre for Humanitarian Action	NGO	Non-governmental organisation
COHAFA	Council working party on Humanitarian Aid and Food Aid	NFI	Non-food items
DfID	Department for International Development	NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council
DG ECHO	Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations	OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
EU	European Union	ODA	Official Development Assistance
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office	OECD/DAC	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development/ Development Assistance Committee
FES	Friedrich Ebert Stiftung / Friedrich Ebert Foundation	RCRC	International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement
FTS	Financial Tracking System	SIDA	Styrelsen för internationellt utvecklingssamarbete/ Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
GAAP	Gemeinsamen Analyse und abgestimmten Planung / Joint Analysis and Agreed Planning	SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
GBV	Gender-Based Violence	UK	United Kingdom
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit / German Development Cooperation	UN	United Nations
GFFO	German Federal Foreign Office	UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
G7	Group of Seven	UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
HDP	Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus	UNSC	United Nations Security Council
HRP	Humanitarian Response Plans	USAID	United States Agency for International Development
ICVA	International Council of Voluntary Organisations	WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene
		WFP	World Food Programme

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1. Introduction

The evolution of few actors in international humanitarian action has been observed as closely as that of the German government. Germany's rapidly growing financial commitment and its rise from a minor humanitarian financier to the second-largest donor nation in the world has garnered appreciation, astonishment, growing expectations, and many question marks from international observers.

German humanitarian action and its international role are currently at a critical juncture on multiple levels

Simultaneously, German humanitarian action and its international role are currently at a critical juncture on multiple levels. The conflict in Ukraine has elevated the strain on the international humanitarian system to a new level, particularly in financial terms. This is underscored by the global record deficit between humanitarian needs and their financial coverage in October 2023, standing at only 32,4 % (FTS OCHA, 2023). Germany's financial and normative roles as an exemplary donor have been further emphasised, accompanied by heightened expectations directed at Berlin. Similarly, Germany's role as a driving force in reforming a humanitarian system in need of restructuring has gained prominence. This system faces challenges, including threats to its values and legal foundations amid the Ukraine war, a humanitarian space that is repeatedly disregarded, and international humanitarian law (IHL) violations extending beyond the conflict. Moreover, growing controversies surround the relevance of humanitarian principles, such as the principle of neutrality and the approach of solidarity. The sluggish pace of reforms toward greater localisation, aiming to enhance the participation and support of local actors, remains a significant challenge.

These trends, showcasing the growing significance of and expectations towards Germany, are also reflected in relevant thematic areas. Germany is currently more engaged than ever in the Grand Bargain, the globally most significant and inclusive humanitarian reform process. In migration and refugee policy, Germany stands out as the sole country that serves as both a leading donor and a primary host nation for refugees. Consequently, there is an expectation that Germany uses its credibility to shape debates and agendas on international migration issues (UNHCR, 2022). At the same time, a void has emerged within the European Union (EU) in the wake of Brexit and the diminished influence of previously prevalent British humanitarian

policy contributions. These European and global shifts have once again increased the focus on Germany's role, not only as a *payer* but also as a *player* in international humanitarian action. The extent of this challenge for Germany is summed up by a European diplomat interviewed for this paper: "They had to hit the ground running. Germany became almost overnight the biggest European humanitarian donor (...) But if you have money but no policies, you are only a cash machine, while if you have policies but no cash, you are only a think tank."

1.1 Current national context

At the same time, in 2023, Germany finds itself at a pivotal moment domestically, potentially marking a turning point in its humanitarian engagement. On the one hand, the new federal government, which took office in December 2021, pledged to stabilise and expand Germany's financial humanitarian engagement, and to advance reforms for more flexible funding of aid and its local anchoring in crisis areas, aligning with initiatives such as the Grand Bargain and the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus (HDP) (SPD, Bündnis90/The Greens und FDP, 2021). On the other hand, the "Zeitenwende" (turning point) debate in Germany (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2022; Politikum, 2022; Scholz, 2022) has raised significant questions about a potential reorientation in terms of foreign, security, economic, and energy policy. However, this debate has yet to address or prioritise the implications of this turning point for development cooperation and humanitarian action and the additional direct and indirect humanitarian challenges posed by the war in Ukraine. On the contrary, public discourse in Germany has shifted toward a debate driven by fears of inflation, recession and an imperative to re-focus on domestic challenges, propagated not only by right-wing populists but also by decision-makers in the humanitarian parliamentary sphere (German Bundestag, 2022; CHA interview). In 2023, this was mirrored in a political agenda in Germany dominated by the overarching political goal of reducing the country's debt. The economy was entering a recession, and the German population perceived itself to be at the limit of its capacity to cope with the burdens. Increasingly, German voters de-prioritised both domestic reform efforts, such as the energy transition and climate change policies, as well as international obligations related to refugee protection and international cooperation.

As a result, the federal government's budget plans for 2024 had anticipated a significant reduction in the humanitarian budget achieved in 2023, decreasing from € 2.7 billion to € 1.9 billion. Meanwhile, the *vabanque* game played by Foreign Minister Baerbock in the preceding year seems poised to falter in 2023. In 2022, the new Foreign Minister, who is perceived as more interested in climate issues than humanitarian concerns, proposed a significant reduction in her humanitarian action budget to meet the Finance Ministry's demands for budget cuts. The rationale behind this approach was that the Budget Committee of the German Bundestag, which has the final say on the budget and has been a keen supporter of humanitarian action, would rectify these cuts by increasing the budget for the Foreign Office. A tactic that succeeded in 2022 but is proving risky for 2024. On the one hand, the parliamentary budget committee raised the budget for humanitarian action again in November 2023 from a solid € 1.7 billion to € 2.4 billion, with a remaining cut of around € 300 million compared to the previous year. On the other hand, the re-organisation of the 2024 federal budget enforced by the Federal Constitutional Court's decision shortly afterwards led to new savings targets for the federal ministries. The final decision will not be made until January 2024.

The federal government's budget plans for 2024 anticipate a significant reduction in the humanitarian budget achieved in 2023

Moreover, foreign policy processes of overarching relevance, such as the development of the 2023 National Security Strategy, lacked a clear focus on issues related to international cooperation in the field of development and humanitarian action, including key concepts such as human security (Commission on Human Security 2003; Prezelj 2008). Consequently, a divergence rather than a collaborative dynamic emerged between Germany's defence and foreign policy "turning point" on one hand and the country's developmental and humanitarian engagement on the other, with the latter now being deprioritised. "With the turning point announced by Chancellor Olaf Scholz, the conditions for the implementation of global goals, such as the foreign policy climate agenda and the 2030 Agenda agreed in the United Nations (UN) with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), are also deteriorating," analysed Brzoska (2022) early on.

This raises urgent questions regarding Germany's medium-term strategy and the suitable priorities for humanitarian action given the constrained resources. However, not only for German but also for international observers, Germany's strategic engagement in the realm of humanitarian policies and reforms as a player has largely been opaque in the past. Simultaneously, the growing expectations have gone unmet, as highlighted by Jan Egeland, Secretary-General of the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and former UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, who retrospectively remarked in 2022¹: "When you came to Berlin five years ago, there was not much to discuss."

Germany is also confronting pivotal decisions in its policy dimension, as the GFFO's current *Strategy for humanitarian assistance abroad 2019-2023* is set to conclude in a few months. The ministry itself deems the existing strategy as too broad, offering a multi-thematic description of the state of humanitarian challenges rather than providing a strategic orientation. The demands placed on the new humanitarian strategy and Germany's self-perception in humanitarian action are now clearly outlined:

"Germany is no longer just a payer, but also a player"

"Germany is no longer just a payer, but also a player" stated the Commissioner for Humanitarian Assistance at the GFFO, Susanne Fries-Gaier².

The German UN Ambassador in New York, Antje Leendertse, embedded this ambition in an even larger context: "[w]e would like to be a pillar of multilateralism, not only financially as a leading donor, but politically and conceptually" (Hauptmeier, 2023).

But to what extent can Germany fulfil these growing expectations towards its humanitarian role today? There is a research deficit here, which this research paper addresses. This is especially pertinent given the backdrop of many years of relatively limited and nationally isolated debate on German humanitarian policy within the public and civil society sphere (see Chapter 2). Therefore, an analysis of the international perception and perspectives on German humanitarian action and its specific characteristics, potentials, strengths, and weaknesses are even more relevant and central to this paper. Such an analysis could indicate in which way the profile and strategy of German humanitarian policies might need to progress within German foreign policy. This paper, therefore, aims to answer the following questions in particular:

1 (The Grand Bargain 2.0 and new dynamics for humanitarian reform. CHA Event recording., 2021)

2 (Rekorde, Rückschläge, Reformen - Wo steht die deutsche humanitäre Hilfe? CHA Event recording., 2022)

1.2 Research questions

- a. What are the international perceptions and expectations of the motives of the German humanitarian engagement, and their balance between a value orientation and an interest orientation?
- b. What potential for German humanitarian engagement can be derived from it, and to what extent has the federal government as an actor made use of this potential so far?
- c. Has Germany developed a profile as a *player* in humanitarian action over the past ten years that matches its financial commitment as a *payer*? And, if so, in which thematic areas or processes? Where do international stakeholders see German engagement as lacking, and what are the causes of the identified weaknesses?
- d. How do international stakeholders perceive Germany's institutional setup as a humanitarian actor? What are the advantages and disadvantages of these structures? How do the administrative, structural, and personnel conditions affect the role that the German government plays in the humanitarian system and the interplay between financial and policy engagement?

This research paper builds on an unpublished discussion paper that the Centre for Humanitarian Action (CHA) shared with select stakeholders in autumn 2022. The diverse and constructive feedback received from stakeholders in civil society, academia, as well as German and international policymakers has been incorporated into the paper. Additionally, the results of further interviews are included (see Chapter 3).

2. Germany's rise as a top financial donor and the foundation of German humanitarian policy

2.1 Germany's profile as a donor

Germany's rise as a humanitarian actor is primarily of a financial nature

Germany's rise as a humanitarian actor has been primarily of a financial nature. As Figure 1 shows, the increase in funding has taken place primarily in the past ten years, especially after 2015 with the rising number of Syrians fleeing to Europe and Germany. Prior to that, Germany's funding ranged between € 50-100 million per year, which represents a modest contribution even among smaller European donors. With the rapid growth in funding volume, which amounted to around € 3.2 billion in 2022, Germany has become the second-largest donor for humanitarian action. It provides around 10 % of global funding for humanitarian crises (Development Initiatives, 2022). This unprecedented development is embedded in the context of recent cuts in the humanitarian budget in the United Kingdom (UK) (around 30 %) and a widespread stagnation in funding from other donor states. Meanwhile,

the humanitarian system is tasked with delivering assistance to an increasing number of people in need (Development Initiatives, 2022).

The GFFO, which is responsible for humanitarian action, does not directly implement aid projects itself but rather funds partner organisations such as Red Cross Red Crescent societies, UN organisations, and humanitarian non-governmental organisations. An analysis of the financial distribution according to partner organisations shows that an increasing share is allocated via UN agencies (Auswärtiges Amt, 2022a). In 2013, the allocation was evenly distributed with half going to UN agencies, a third to non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and a twelfth to Red Cross Red Crescent organisations. However, this ratio has since evolved. In 2022, 80 % of the funds were allocated to UN agencies, while the share for NGO and Red Cross Red Crescent further declined to 12 % and 8 %, respectively (German Bundestag, 2023).

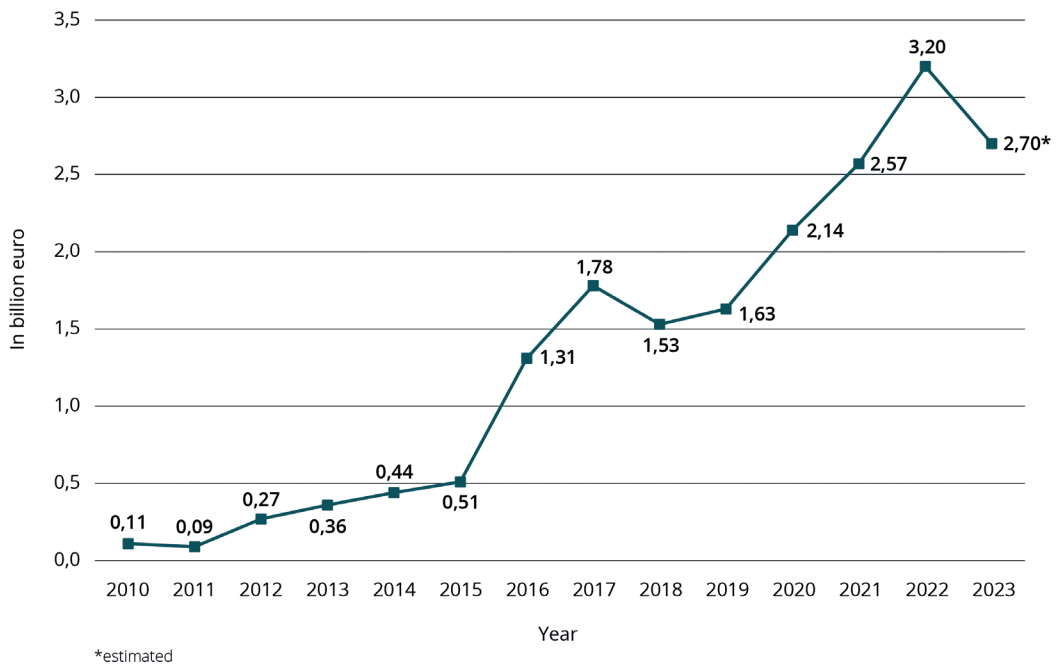


Figure 1: GFFO funds for humanitarian action 2010-2023;
Source: Reports of the Federal Government on German humanitarian aid abroad 2014-2017; 2018-2021

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
UN	168	251	332	1.022	1.380	1.160	1.183	1.511	1.970	2.594
NGOs	105	106	97	153	181	174	211	291	276	393
RCRC**	38	65	66	145	201	168	189	289	260	254

*Figures rounded to millions of euros
**Red Cross Red Crescent organisations

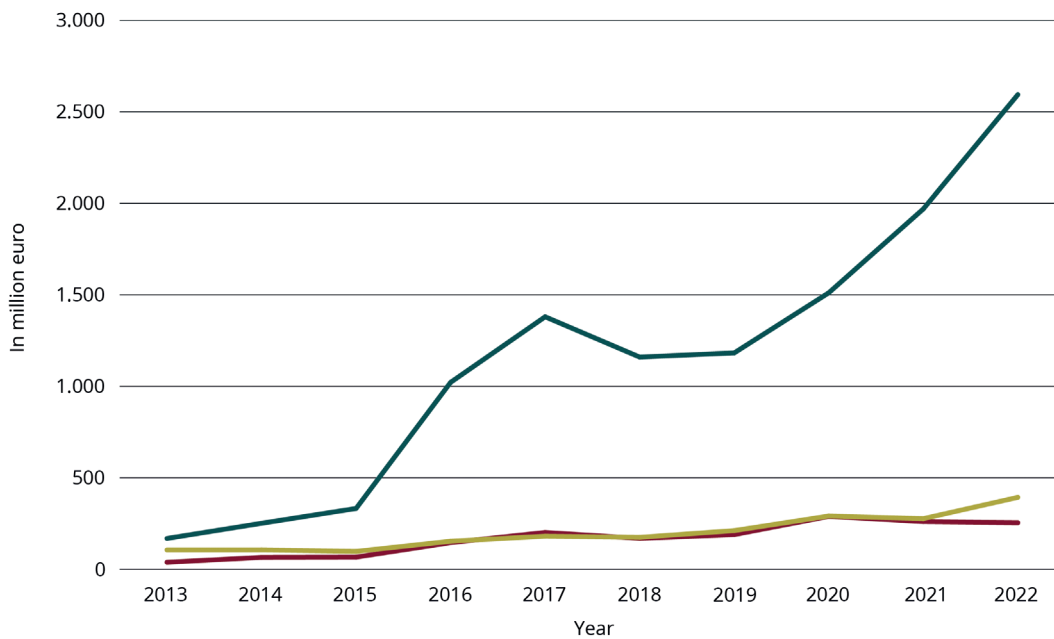


Figure 2: German humanitarian funding by partner organisation;
Source: Reports of the Federal Government on German humanitarian aid abroad 2014-2017; 2018-2021

Principled Payer, but Purposeful Player?

- International perceptions of German humanitarian action and their implications for Germany's strategic capacities

Since 2012, the GFFO has increasingly relied on pooled funding mechanisms, which are internationally regarded as efficient and sustainable, notably within the framework of the Grand Bargain. Germany's initial contribution was a modest € 6.6 million in 2007. In recent years, significantly larger sums have been channelled through the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) and the Country-Based Pooled Funds (CBPF). In 2021, the contributions amounted were € 151.4 million and € 393.6 million, respectively. These substantial payments into the pooled mechanisms have enabled Germany to increase its reputation as a significant humanitarian donor.

The rise in contributions was paralleled by the development of the first humanitarian strategy, which was published in 2012. This strategy marked the first strategic integration of all areas of humanitarian action – emergency aid, transitional aid, and disaster preparedness – under conceptual, rather than purely charitable, purposes. In addition, the strategy formulated the basic principles of German humanitarian action, such as the partnership approach, topic-specific guidelines, and the claim to contribute to the development of the humanitarian system in forums and initiatives. In 2014, Germany assumed the chairmanship of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) Donor Support Group for the first time, engaging in strategic discussions with other donors.

The GFFO's humanitarian strategy underwent a revision in 2018 and was reissued for the period 2019-2023, with a focus on humanitarian access, innovation and forgotten crises. The document reflects the aspiration to see humanitarian action as an "integral and defining component of German foreign policy" and Germany as an "active co-shaper of the international humanitarian system" (Auswärtiges Amt, 2019a, p. 7). However, various civic and public humanitarian actors in Germany acknowledge that the strategy's diversity of topics and the lack of prioritisation reflect a balancing of different interests rather than a clear strategic orientation.

Since 2010, the federal government has informed the German Bundestag about its humanitarian engagement through a regular four-year report, which is usually discussed in a hearing at the relevant parliamentary committee.

Formally, this setup has persisted until today. Reporting continues to take place every four years, despite the rapid changes in the sector and the increasing importance of overlapping crises for German foreign policy overall, as repeatedly criticised by German civil society. The latest report by the German government placed thematic emphasis on the Grand Bargain, anticipatory action, protection of humanitarian space,

displacement, gender, and Covid-19, which are in part considerably different from its humanitarian strategy (GFFO 2022a). The transparency of German humanitarian action is also under critical scrutiny internationally: the GFFO was listed as a new donor in the latest Aid Transparency Index. Ranked 44th out of 50, the GFFO falls in the last quarter with an assessment that the transparency of published data is "weak".

Germany's involvement in crises and emergencies has increased over the past decades but differs from other countries. A reluctance to engage in military operations and pursue *hard power* policies, justified by historical context, has increasingly provoked irritation among allies. Examples include the abstention on the Libya Resolution 1973 of the UN Security Council (UNSC) in 2011 or the coalition against the Islamic State (Bunde et al., 2020). This cultural approach continues to significantly influence Germany's strategic capacity in humanitarian and international crisis engagement. The "Munich Consensus" in 2014, championed by prominent figures in security policy, called for a departure from restraint and greater global responsibility for Germany (Bunde et al. 2020). This reorientation of German foreign policy was preceded by a "review process" in 2015. Alongside the guideline "Foreign Policy with Means," the establishment of Department S, responsible for Crisis Prevention, Stabilisation, Post-Conflict Rehabilitation and Humanitarian Action, aimed to consolidate expertise, personnel and financial resources for diplomatic engagement (GFFO 2018).

Humanitarian action featured prominently within the ambitious framework for a stringent and strategic crisis prevention policy. However, in the 2022 revision of the stabilisation policy, the GFFO moderated the possibilities of a stabilisation policy linked to other policy areas,

Humanitarian action featured prominently within the ambitious framework for a stringent and strategic crisis prevention policy

such as humanitarian action, especially in light of developments in Afghanistan and the Sahel region. In adopting a more modest approach, the GFFO recognised

trade-offs and dilemmas concerning a fundamentally apolitical and purely needs-based humanitarian action. It is imperative to emphasise that humanitarian concerns held a significant place in high-level international proceedings, such as Germany's presidencies of the UNSC in 2019-2020, the Council of the European Union in 2020, and the Group of Seven (G7) in 2021. These engagements underscored humanitarian matters as an integral facet of Germany's thematic priorities within the respective international arenas.

2.2 Structures and capacities of German humanitarian action

Humanitarian action in Germany is the responsibility of the GFFO's Department S, which was founded in 2015 (GFFO 2018). The Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) is responsible for German development cooperation, "structure-building transitional aid" and peace-building measures. The formally private German Corporation for International Cooperation (GIZ) serves as the implementing partner for technical cooperation under BMZ. The international arm of the Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau (KfW) is responsible for international financial cooperation. Unlike agencies such as GIZ or the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), there is no implementing agency for humanitarian action, and there are no decentralised structures in crisis regions. The Federal Ministry of the Interior is responsible for humanitarian-related areas such as national migration policies and refugee issues in Germany.

The current structure reflects institutional changes in the division of responsibilities for international affairs between the BMZ and the GFFO, which are overlapping and, in some cases, characterised by competition. In 2011, the government transferred full responsibility for humanitarian action to the GFFO, while the BMZ assumed responsibility for crisis prevention and conflict management. However, the thematic proximity, particularly in the case of project grants for "transitional assistance", highlights the challenge of establishing clear mandates between the areas of responsibility. The "Spending Review Process" of the Federal Ministry of Finance criticised this situation back in 2018, largely without consequences (Federal Ministry of Finance 2018).

The division of development cooperation and humanitarian action between two ministries is distinct from the approach taken by other state donors, such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Switzerland, or the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). Implementing organisations criticise that coordination, particularly concerning transitional assistance, is sometimes not well managed between ministries. The ministries have attempted to address this through the "Joint Analysis and Agreed Planning" (GAAP) approach, applied selectively in certain country contexts, and the "Chapeau Approach", in which aid projects are jointly financed, aiming to enhance the realisation of the HDP

Implementing organisations criticise that coordination is sometimes not well managed between ministries

Nexus. Simultaneously, there is a clear institutional separation between principled emergency response and development policy, which is more closely aligned with political actors and interests. The structure also promotes visibility and political buy-in across the party spectrum, especially when ministers from different parties lead the respective houses, proving useful in past budget negotiations.

Decentralised diplomatic structures similar to those found in the humanitarian systems of the US, the UK, or the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO) (which employs over 400 staff in the missions abroad alone) are absent in the German humanitarian context. German embassies worldwide lack a full-time position for a seconded or locally recruited GFFO staff member for humanitarian policy (German Bundestag,

2023). The lack of decentralisation of humanitarian competencies in the German system mirrors the structure of the German diplomatic service as a whole, concentrating decision-making competencies in Berlin and exhibiting little permeability. As the former

Minister of State Annen admitted on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the GFFO: "How can we better involve our missions abroad in the decisions here in Berlin at headquarters?" Annen asked, conceding that, in 2020, an in-house culture of "team spirit instead of authoritarianism, collegiality instead of knowledge of domination and feminism instead of patriarchy," had yet to be created (Auswärtiges Amt, 2020).

In terms of quantitative personnel resources, the GFFO has had to cope with a large increase in its humanitarian units in recent years. However, this growth has not kept pace with the increase in its humanitarian funds. In 2011, the GFFO had allocated humanitarian funds of only € 90 million (GFFO, 2021) "with a handful of desk officers," as one former staff member described it.³

In 2023, the GFFO established three humanitarian units with a total of 64 positions, including part-time roles, of which about 20 % were vacant as of summer 2023, according to the ministry.⁴ Furthermore, there was a reduction in staff positions within the GFFO, which were transferred to the newly created subordinate authority known as the Federal Office for Foreign Affairs (Bundesamt für Auswärtige Angelegenheiten) (German Bundestag, 2023). The humanitarian units

³ The GFFO did not have data available on the number of humanitarian staff in 2011.

⁴ These figures may be higher than usual as they were collected at the time of the standardised rotation date.

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operate programmatically (Unit S09) and in the policy field (S07 & S08) with a record 2022 budget of € 3.2 billion. Consequently, a total of 75 posts, equivalent to 0.61 % of the total staff of 12,346 employees (Auswärtiges Amt, 2022b), were responsible for approximately 40 % of the total GFFO budget of € 8.05 billion. Until 2023, German diplomatic staff consistently rotated their post every three to four years.⁵ To strengthen in-house expertise, the humanitarian units increasingly rely on external staff, whose contracts are typically limited to two years without promotion opportunities.

In-house calculations by the GFFO demonstrate a comparatively lower humanitarian staffing ratio⁶ relative to the humanitarian funds to be dispersed when compared to other leading donor nations (see Table 1). These numbers must be considered in relation to funding modalities, with Germany predominantly allocating most of its funds to UN agencies and pooled funding.

Nonetheless, this practice also applies to other donors, such as Sweden, and can only explain part of the significant differences in proportional staffing levels. Sweden employs three times as much staff per Euro/US dollar spent compared to Germany, the US four times and DG ECHO nine times as much (German Bundestag, 2020). In 2023, the disparity between these actors is likely to increase, as Germany will implement a budget of around € 2.7 billion with 75 em-

ployees, meaning the staff-funding ratio in Berlin has declined from € 27.9 million per employee in 2020 to € 36 million in 2023 (German Bundestag, 2023).

Unlike the UK, US or Sweden, Germany lacks a long tradition of humanitarian action as a policy field. This is evident in past policy debates on topics such as cash assistance or the cluster system, which were mostly driven by Anglophone actors. At the civil society level, this is also reflected in the limited and at times isolated policy exchange between German NGOs (Quack, 2016). The rather subordinate position in the humanitarian system stood in contrast with Germany's more substantial role in development policy discourses and the number of institutions active in development cooperation.

In contrast to France or the UK, where donors and humanitarian organisations can draw on expertise from think tanks such as Groupe URD (founded in 1993) or the Humanitarian Policy Group (founded in the 1970s), German actors have limited access to policy analysis and research on humanitarian action. Only a few studies deal specifically with German humanitarian action, its actors, or its policy issues beyond advocacy (Weingärtner, 2011; Weingärtner and Otto, 2013; Garavoglia, 2015; Quack, 2016; Kurtzer, Goodrick and Vaidya, 2021). Quack (2016) conducted a pilot study on German actors, their capabilities, and the political weight of humanitarian action in Germany. He concluded that German actors have a strong project and fundraising orientation. A first CHA analysis in 2019 concluded that the German government still lacks strategic capacity and effectiveness in the field of humanitarian policies (Südhoff and Hövelmann, 2019).

Humanitarian Assistance	Overall funding (rounded) in million euro 2020	Number of staff	Funding per staff (rounded) in million Euro
Germany	2,137	76.5	27.9
Sweden	405.9	45	9.0
US	4,972	750	6.6
United Kingdom	1,762	150	11.7
EU Commission (DG ECHO)	1,823	600	3.0

Table 1: Comparison of funding per staff at GFFO with other humanitarian donor states in 2020. Source: German Bundestag, 2020.

5 According to the German news magazine Spiegel, a non-technical administrative career path without rotation is planned for example in the departments of humanitarian aid and climate foreign policy (Spiegel 2023).

6 This also applies to the GFFO as a whole. The number of posts in the Foreign Service today is roughly the same as in 1993, although Germany plays a much more important role in foreign policy. The staffing situation in embassies of focus countries such as Mali also corresponds to that at the beginning of the 1990s (Brockmeier and Peez, 2021).

Examining the current state of the system, the context of Germany's role in the humanitarian system has changed drastically in recent years. Brexit and the devaluation of multilateral institutions

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by the Trump administration have weakened liberal institutionalism. Simultaneously, escalating needs arising from protracted conflict contexts, the climate crisis, the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the humanitarian consequences of the Russian war against Ukraine require substantial adjustments to humanitarian policies and reforms.

2.3 Strategic capability of Germany's foreign policy

Germany's growing role as a humanitarian donor and actor aligns with its evolving role at the international level. In the aftermath of World War II, Germany maintained a relatively restrained stance in foreign policy for an extended period (Schoeller, 2023). However, the Russian war in Ukraine in February 2022 marked a pivotal moment. Chancellor Scholz announced a "turning point" and an "awakening", particularly in the field of security policy, where, according to the head of the Chancellor's Office, Wolfgang Schmidt, Germany was still a "teenager" (Oltermann, 2022).

Prior to this turning point, experts in security and foreign policy pointed out Germany's perceived lack of strategic capability (Brockmeier, 2021; Stelzenmüller, Major and Mölling, 2021). The Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES), for instance, commented that "Germany's positioning in multilateral forums of the UN, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the EU is notoriously lacking strategic orientation, conceptual direction and creative will" (FES, 2014, p. 1). Similarly, an interviewee in a report on the Munich Security Conference stated that "Germany [is] a 'strategic black hole' at the heart of the alliance [NATO] which did not offer any impetus whatsoever (Bunde et al., 2020, p. 18).

Not surprisingly, similar deficiencies were evident in Germany's engagement in crisis and conflict contexts, despite it having been a (financially) significant aspect of its foreign policy for an extended period. For instance, a study on Germany's peace engagement in Mali and Niger exposed a reliance on France's Sahel policy, partly stemming from the absence of a clear definition of its own interests and impetus in the overall Sahel strategy (Schnabel and Witt, 2022). A peer review by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's Development Assistance Committee (OECD/DAC) criticised Germany's development engagement for lacking an overall vision. Similarly, it noted that the non-interference approach

among autonomous ministries would undermine a "whole-of-government approach" (OECD, 2021).

The significance of strategic capability for Germany's foreign policy is underscored by Prantl and Goh (2022), who emphasise the importance by highlighting today's complex and changing environment of "more actors, more vectors, more factors". They assert that there is a need for "strategic diplomacy" due to a "shrinking policy space, hyperconnectivity and pluralism of global order". This pluralism is exemplified by the recent expansion of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) to include six additional nations (Stuenkel, 2023).

In a globalised world grappling with 'wicked' or 'long' problems (Hale, 2024), where challenges such as the climate crisis, migration trends and pandemics demand joint action, strategic diplomacy and *soft power* are all the more important (Nye, 2004). According to

In a globalised world grappling with 'wicked' or 'long' problems strategic diplomacy and soft power are all the more important

Angenendt (2021), strategic capability involves defining goals and priorities, making meaningful contributions and assuming responsibility for them. International engagement, such as

development cooperation or humanitarian action, is frequently recognised as a tool for exercising "soft" influence through persuasion and attraction, encapsulated in the concept of *soft power* (see Section 7.2).⁷

An important component in this context is the perception of others. Perceptions hold significance not only as a reflection of a country's international reputation but also for the effectiveness of crisis interventions abroad, as demonstrated by Witt (2020). Numerous studies examining international perceptions and expectations of Germany's international governance power draw positive conclusions. For instance, the survey "Germany in the eyes of the world", conducted by GIZ, calls for greater German engagement with a sense of proportion (GIZ, 2018; Körber Stiftung, 2020).

⁷ For the Scandinavian countries, for example, the authors de Bengy Puyvallée and Björkdahl (2021) analysed the long-lasting, cultivated image of the "Scandinavian Humanitarian Brand" in more detail.

To assess the strategic capability of German humanitarian policy, this research paper examines both the self-perception and external perception of its humanitarian engagement.

Perceptions hold significance not only as a reflection of a country's international reputation, but also for the effectiveness of crisis interventions abroad

How do international actors view German humanitarian action, its potential, its strategic strengths and its weaknesses against this background? What lessons can be learned from these perspectives for the further development of its structures, priorities and new strategy?

The following chapters present the findings derived from both quantitative and qualitative research on the perceptions of international humanitarian experts regarding German humanitarian engagement. These insights hold paramount importance for understanding the potential, impact, and future of Ger-

man humanitarian action. The assessment zeroes in on various facets, starting with an exploration of the motives and values underpinning German humanitarian action and their influence on its potential and international standing in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 delves into the issues associated with Germany as a humanitarian actor, its respective strategic capacity and its position among the top donor nations. The subsequent chapter, Chapter 6, offers a case study examining Germany's engagement in the Grand Bargain process. These findings are then categorised within two analytical frameworks in Chapter 7. Section 7.1 scrutinises the balance between Germany's process vs. policy orientation, while Section 7.2 differentiates German engagement and its perception of the levels of Germany's *hard power* vs. *soft power*. Finally, section 7.3 outlines the structural and administrative specifics of German humanitarian engagement and explores the international perception of its strengths and weaknesses. The paper concludes in Chapter 8 by summarising the results and presenting a series of recommendations informed by the research findings.

3. Methodological approach and data collection

Methodologically, this research paper builds on an unpublished discussion paper written in November 2022, which was shared with a wide range of humanitarian decision-makers, practitioners and analysts, incorporating their feedback. The discussion paper was based on two pillars: firstly, a survey of around 200 humanitarian practitioners, and secondly, 37 qualitative, semi-structured interviews with humanitarian experts. In addition to the primarily qualitative data collection, the paper analysed relevant policy documents. The theoretical framework of the discussion paper was informed by analyses of the strategic capability of German foreign policy and the study of perceptions in the social sciences (Brockmeier, 2020; Schlie, 2020; Witt, 2020; Angenendt, 2021; Kloke-Lesch, 2021).

The survey on **international perceptions** of German humanitarian engagement included 203 participants (N=203) from 52 countries. In this context, the regional focus lies on the largest humanitarian crisis contexts and their neighbouring countries, which accounts for the low number of respondents from North, Central and South America (see Figure A). Germany-based respondents constituted one-third of the total, while two-thirds were located abroad. Figure B illustrates the diverse institutional background of respondents, encompassing key humanitarian actors.⁸

The 37 **qualitative interviews** with international experts were conducted as semi-structured, guided discussions in the summer and autumn of 2022. These

⁸ Around 41 % of respondents work for civil society organisations, which may affect the results. An attempt was made to counteract this distribution during data collection by increasing the outreach to employees of other organisations. However, due to the sample size, no weightings can be applied when calculating the results. The results of the survey are indicative and not representative due to the sample size. The data collection took place between 19 May and 4 July 2022 and was conducted as an independent online survey using Survey Monkey.

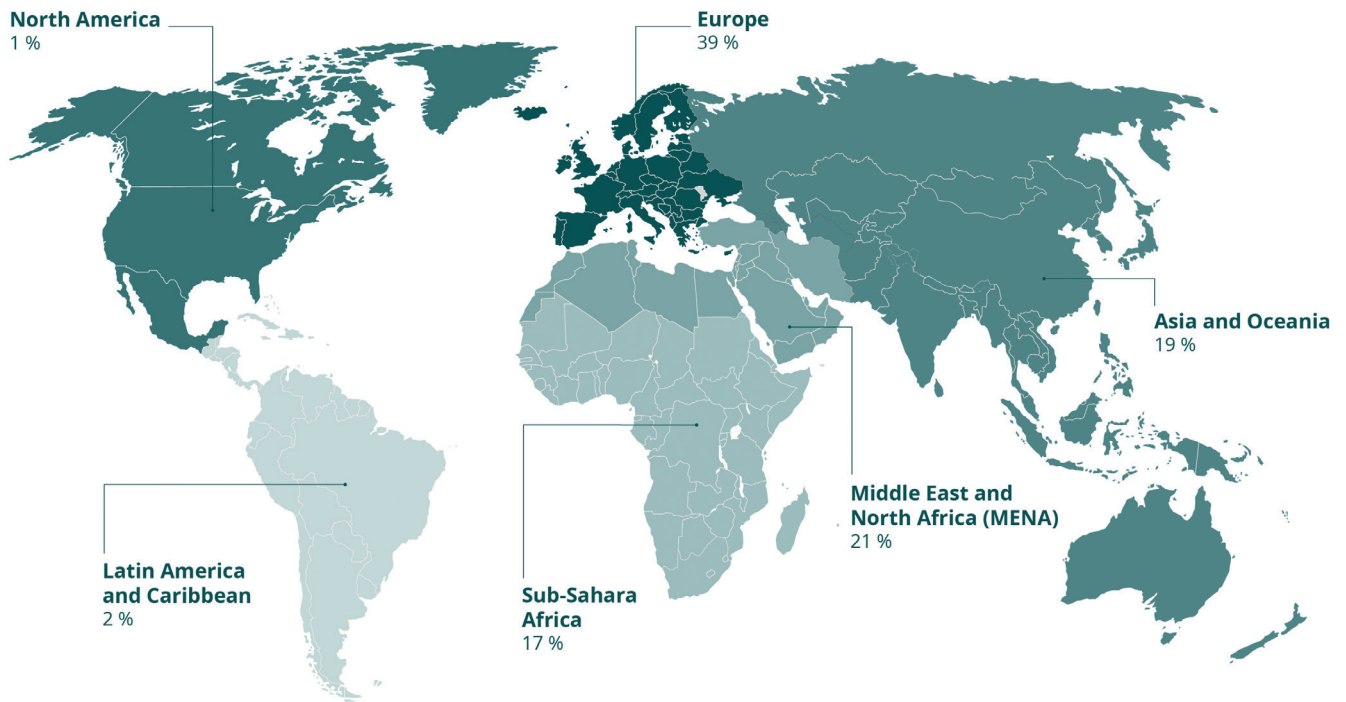


Figure A: Respondents' regional background

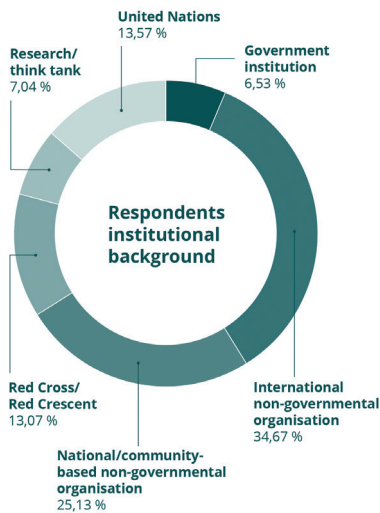


Figure B: Respondents' institutional background

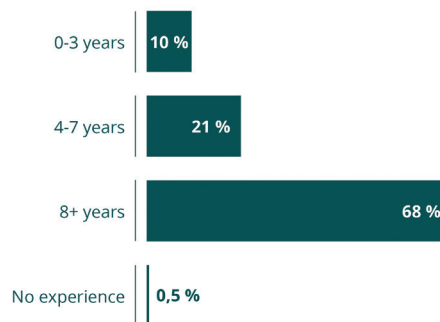


Figure C: Respondents' work experience

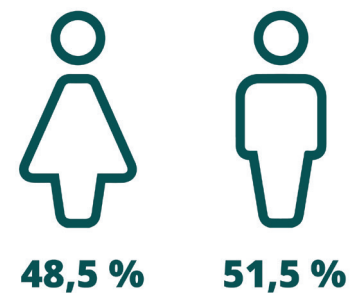


Figure D: Respondents' gender

interviews comprised 14 discussions with government representatives, five with UN representatives, eight international and local NGO representatives, five with EU representatives, two representatives of the International Red Cross Red Crescent Movement (RCRC), and two academics. Due to the regional distribution of the interviewees between Beirut, Berlin, Berne, Brussels, The Hague, Geneva, London, New York, Oslo, Stockholm and Washington, the survey was largely limited to the so-called Global North. Although the global distribution of participants in both the interviews and the survey allows for a comparative analysis of quantitative and qualitative results, establishing a correlation between the two remains challenging.

As part of the ongoing refinement of the discussion paper for the final study, three additional interviews were conducted with representatives of local aid organisations in Istanbul and Beirut. Additionally, four feedback discussions were held with representatives of the GFFO, accompanied by more informal exchange formats with national and international stakeholders. To enhance the comprehensiveness of the study, all chapters of the discussion paper underwent updates or expansions. Two new chapters were added: one focusing on foreign policy strategic capability (Section 2.3), and another addressing the question of whether German funding of humanitarian crises is principle- and needs-oriented or oriented towards national interests (Chapter 4).

4. Motivation and principle-orientation as a humanitarian donor

4.1 An honest broker? Positive international perceptions

The German government asserts its role as a humanitarian actor with a clear orientation towards humanitarian principles

The German government asserts its role as a humanitarian actor with a clear orientation towards humanitarian principles and claims to allocate funding based solely on needs (Auswärtiges Amt, 2019b). Value orientation

is emphasised in Germany's humanitarian strategy, explicitly denying any friction with an interest-oriented approach (Auswärtiges Amt, 2019b, 2022a). This question holds great relevance, particularly in light of an internationally threatened humanitarian space and the observed declining prioritisation of humanitarian principles and values, even within the capitals of Western donor nations (Worley, 2020).

Germany's credibility as a representative of humanitarian values is also dependent on its own humanitarian actions. However, the consistent principle orientation of Germany's engagement, as well as its coherence with its foreign, security, and migration policy, has been questioned by German stakeholders in the past (Südhoff and Hövelmann, 2019; Westphal, 2020; Kreidler, Hövelmann and Spencer, 2023). International assessments of the motives and principles of German humanitarian action, on the other hand, have not been systematically assessed to date. The results of the CHA surveys become even more relevant against this backdrop, especially as they reveal disparities between national and international perceptions.

As indicated by the survey data, more than half of the respondents agree with the statement that Germany is an honest broker – a donor in humanitarian action driven by values and humanitarian principles, thereby possessing credibility as a mediator and facilitator. This figure rises to 80 % when respondents who "somewhat agree" are included (Figure 3). When the respondents are segmented into those based in Germany and those based abroad, the perception is notably more positive for the latter. 60 % of participants based abroad agree that Germany is an honest broker, while only 5 % disagree with the statement (Figure 5).⁹

In the survey, this sentiment was examined by asking whether humanitarian aid in Germany is primarily allocated based on altruistic or interest-driven motives (Figure 4). Once again, a large majority, comprising 70 % of the respondents, indicated an inclination to allocate funds for altruistic motives, such as strengthening the multilateral system, and long-term benefits from overcoming humanitarian crises. In contrast, 30 % tended to see interest-oriented or transactional reasons. Notably, one in five respondents saw geopolitical or migration policy considerations as the main reason for allocating funds.

However, survey respondents indicated in their responses that no clear singular motive can be identified. Instead, they perceive German aid allocations as a mixture of several motives. Figure 6 illustrates that respondents based in Germany chose geopolitical and migration policy considerations as the most fre-

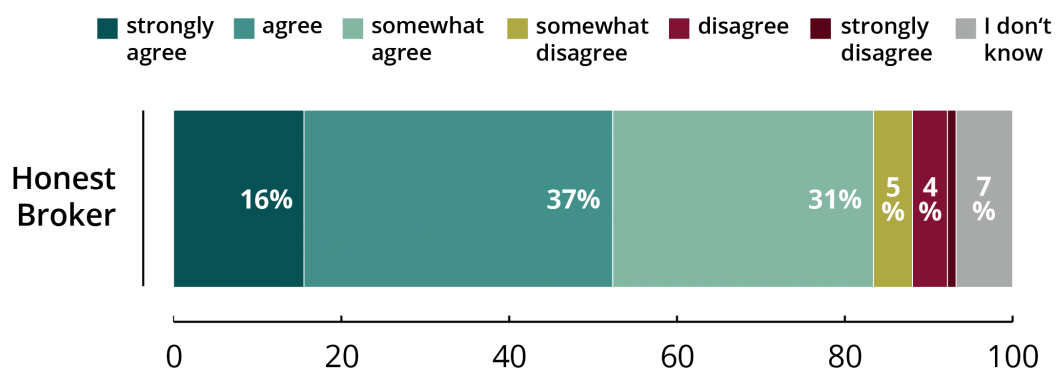


Figure 3: Is Germany an honest broker in humanitarian affairs?

⁹ The positive perception of Germany's international civilian (crisis prevention and peacebuilding) engagement as "credible", "honest" and "coherent" was also confirmed, for example, in a study on the Sahelian countries Mali and Niger (Schnabel and Witt 2022, 55).

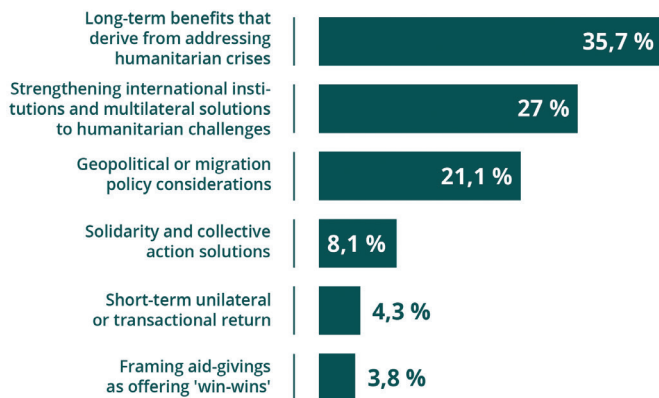


Figure 4: What drives Germany's aid spending primarily?

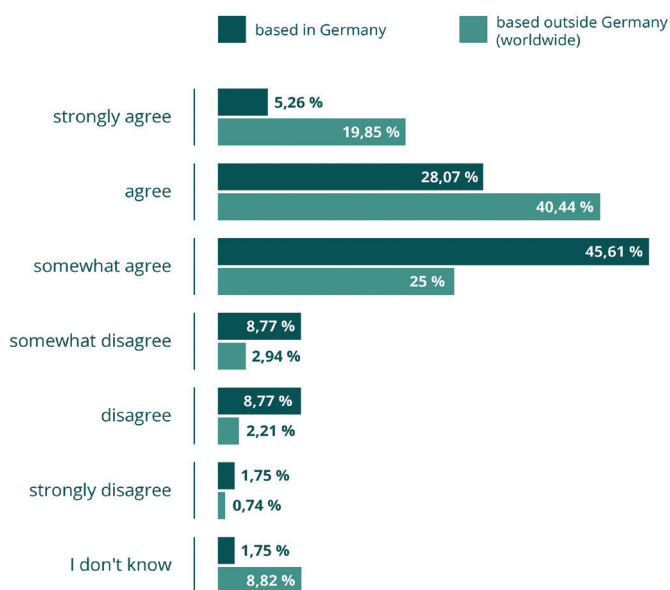


Figure 5: Is Germany an honest broker in humanitarian affairs? (based on the location of the respondent)



Figure 6: What drives Germany's aid spending primarily? (based on the location of the respondent)

quent response option, followed by the category 'strengthening the multilateral system'. Respondents who were less familiar with the German context were more likely to see the benefits that follow from dealing with humanitarian crises as the primary motivation.

The quantitative results of the CHA survey are confirmed by the qualitative interviews. This alignment was reflected in open-ended questions about the most essential characteristic of German humanitarian action. By far the most frequently mentioned answer among the 40 interviewees was a perceived orientation of German aid towards the four humanitarian principles (humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence). The majority of interviewees agreed with the statement that Germany is a very principled and value-oriented donor.

Interviewees related Germany's adherence to principles and its corresponding credibility to various factors. This included thematic commitments, such as addressing humanitarian access issues and protecting humanitarian workers in the context of policy engagement during its membership in the UNSC (2020/2021), as well as the allocation of German humanitarian funds in a needs-based way. The strong willingness displayed by Germany in the Syrian migration context in 2015, along with its accommodation of a large number of refugees in the subsequent years, was also named in several interviews as a relevant factor for Germany's credibility and value orientation in humanitarian issues. However, it's worth noting that about one in five participants in the survey identified migration issues as a primary motivation behind Berlin's aid spending. "2015 has been a watershed moment," says one donor representative. "Germany is a top 2 donor and a top 5 refugee hosting country - this is a unique mix and moral stance, but it is not yet making much out of it," says a UN representative.

Furthermore, many interviewees, particularly those from the field of practitioners and implementing organisations, perceived Germany's value orientation as reflected in a culture of listening and a willingness to learn without agenda or ideology. This approach was observed and appreciated, standing in clear contrast to the practices of other large donor nations.

The international perception of Germany's motives and the value orientation of its humanitarian engagement is thus significantly more positive than the respective national debates in the past. For example, discussions about a perceived structural mixing of Germany's humanitarian engagement with security and stabilization policy

interests in regions such as the Sahel, or migration policy versus needs-oriented aspects in the financing of refugee-relevant contexts (Westphal, 2020; Meisler, 2021; Steinke, 2021; von Pilar, 2022). The results of the CHA survey among respondents based in Germany also underscore a clear difference from the perspectives of international stakeholders, as described.

Irrespective of the specific standards and criteria underlying these judgements, the more positive international perception bestows significant potential upon Germany as a credible and, at least financially powerful, broker for principle-oriented humanitarian action that is changing dynamically and capable of reform. This potential and expectation of a German role in

The more positive international perception bestows significant potential upon Germany as a credible and, at least financially powerful, broker

also a special role due to its limited colonial past and being less economically, politically influenced than, for example, France”, says one diplomat. “Germany has the potential to provide the leadership in ensuring in the European landscape the humanitarian space, and a European project on humanitarian affairs,” a donor representative seconds.

this direction as a leading *player* were also mentioned in numerous interviews. “There are some expectations to fill. There is since Brexit now more space for Germany and others, and Germany has

4.2 Principle-based assistance? Germany’s allocation of funds for humanitarian crises

The allocation of Germany’s humanitarian funds in a value- and principle-oriented manner is a key factor influencing the country’s positioning as a humanitarian *payer* and *player*, as well as its overall credibility. This paper delves into the varying perceptions surrounding these issues based on Germany’s actual funding practice. In this context, the paper scrutinises whether the allocation aligns with the shared international perceptions, emphasising a focus on humanitarian needs and the principles of humanity and impartiality. Additionally, the paper explores whether the decision-making process is influenced by national interests, particularly in the context of security and migration policies. Furthermore, the inquiry aims to identify the potential for Germany to shape humanitarian policies through exemplary, value-oriented leadership.

This chapter will therefore analyse in more detail the humanitarian operations and crisis regions financed by Germany. The objective is to examine the extent to which German priorities align with the humanitarian principles of impartiality and humanity, as well as the degree to which allocation is guided by needs and values.

In this context, the paper presents and analyses various statistics. It is important to note that both national and international data related to humanitarian financial flows and needs in crisis regions vary significantly and are only in parts comparable.

Therefore, the subsequent data will be compared in two ways: Firstly, by examining the global humanitarian needs and, proportionally, the needs of individual crisis regions in relation to the overall global requirements. Secondly, by assessing German funding concerning the most significant crisis regions and its re-

spective share of the total German funding during the observation period. The data is summarised in these two different ways for the years 2019 (the starting point of the current German humanitarian strategy and its objectives) to 2021 (the latest covered year in the most recent four-year report by the GFFO, encompassing certain available data on German humanitarian action).

Figure 7 illustrates the proportional need for humanitarian assistance in specific crisis regions relative to global humanitarian needs. This assessment is derived from Humanitarian Response Plans (HRPs) and appeals in these countries (highlighted in the red column in Figure 7). The graphic encompasses key humanitarian crises from 2019 to 2021, each associated with an individual HRP. Additionally, the data is juxtaposed with Germany’s humanitarian funds allocated to each of these crises and the corresponding portion of Germany’s total humanitarian funding between 2019 and 2021 (green column, Figure 7).

There are only minor discrepancies between humanitarian needs and Germany’s humanitarian involvement in various crises

If Germany were to allocate its humanitarian funds purely based on existing needs, meaning proportionally to the assessed requirement of people in need per crisis, the percentage shares per crisis of the total global need and of Germany’s total global humanitarian funds would be identical.

When examining the average shares for the years 2019 to 2021, it becomes evident that there are only minor discrepancies between humanitarian needs and Germany’s humanitarian involvement in various

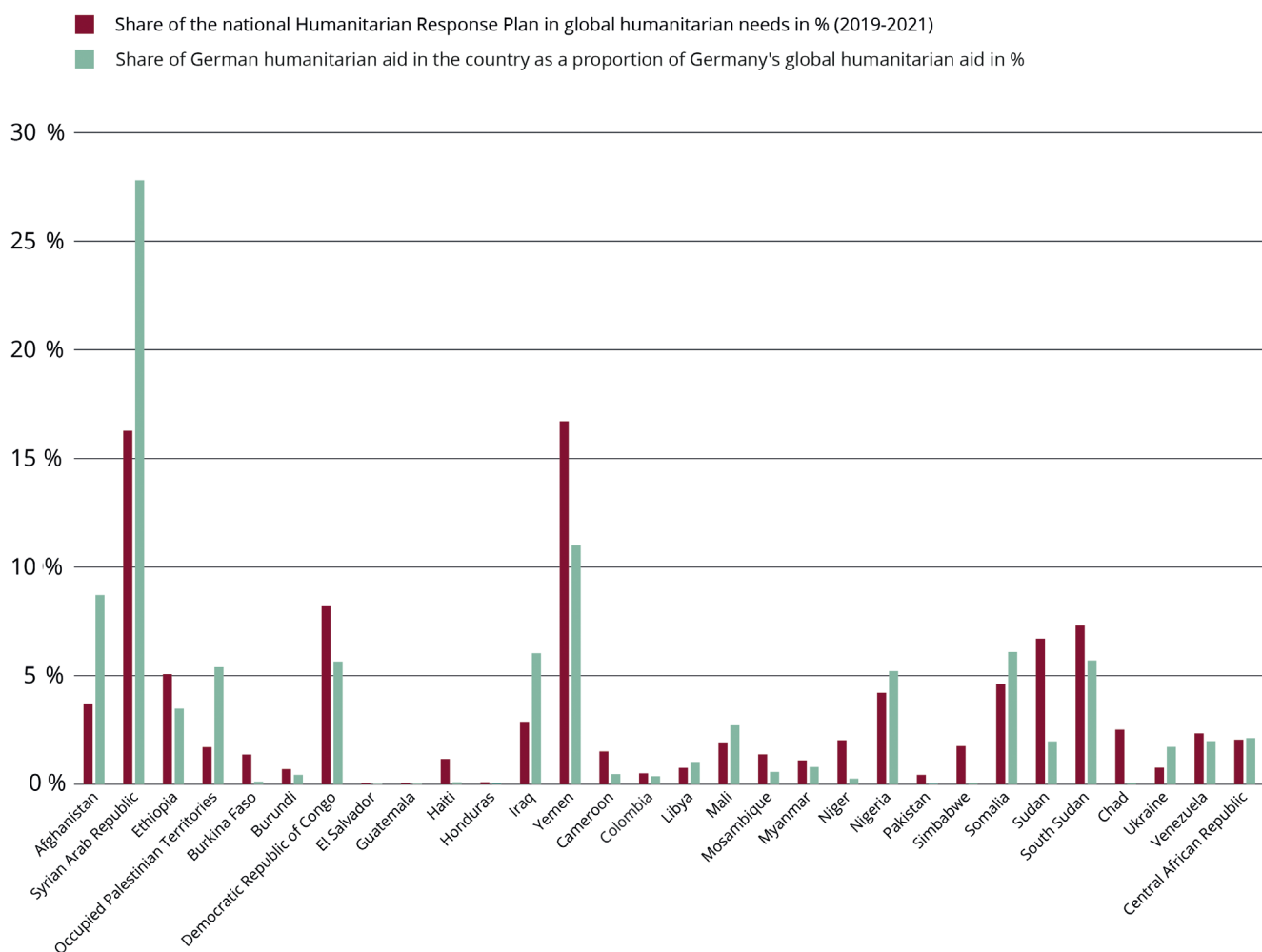


Figure 7: Share of global humanitarian assistance and Germany's humanitarian funding by country
 Source: Report of the Federal Government on German humanitarian aid abroad 2018-2021; FTS OCHA 2023; Global Humanitarian Overview 2021

crises. Notably, Germany demonstrated a disproportionately strong engagement in Syria and, to a lesser extent, in Afghanistan, Iraq and Palestine. Conversely, its engagement has been comparatively lower in countries such as Yemen, Sudan, Zimbabwe and Haiti.

However, a purely statistical approach, driven solely by ex-ante needs, overlooks Germany's donor responsibility to coordinate and balance its humanitarian action with other relevant donors throughout a crisis or budget year. This method fails to account for volatile access issues or abrupt changes in humanitarian crises, which can significantly impact funding decisions. Disproportionately high funding from Germany may indicate a lack of commitment from other donors. Conversely, a lower level of funding may be justified in light of extensive funding from other donor sources.

To address these considerations, the second step of the statistical analysis involves a retrospective examination of the allocated funding for humanitarian crises during the same period. This analysis aims to examine whether there are any correlations between

Germany's financial engagement and the actual funding allocated to humanitarian crises.

On average, only 52 % of the analysed humanitarian crises and their corresponding needs were funded between 2019 and 2021. The level of funding globally for these crises varied significantly, ranging from 84 % in Iraq to less than 9 % in Honduras. If Germany is strongly oriented towards addressing unmet needs and adhering to humanitarian principles, it should be disproportionately more engaged in underfunded crises and vice versa. Consequently, Figure 8 compares the funding of a specific crisis with Germany's over or under-proportional engagement in the crisis (expressed as a percentage of non-proportional engagement, as shown in Figure 8).

In an ideal scenario, at the conclusion of a budget year and within the framework of donor coordination, purely needs-based German assistance would primarily fall within the highlighted area in the graphic below. This implies that it would either represent under-proportional German financing in the context of a relatively well-funded HRP, as indicated by the

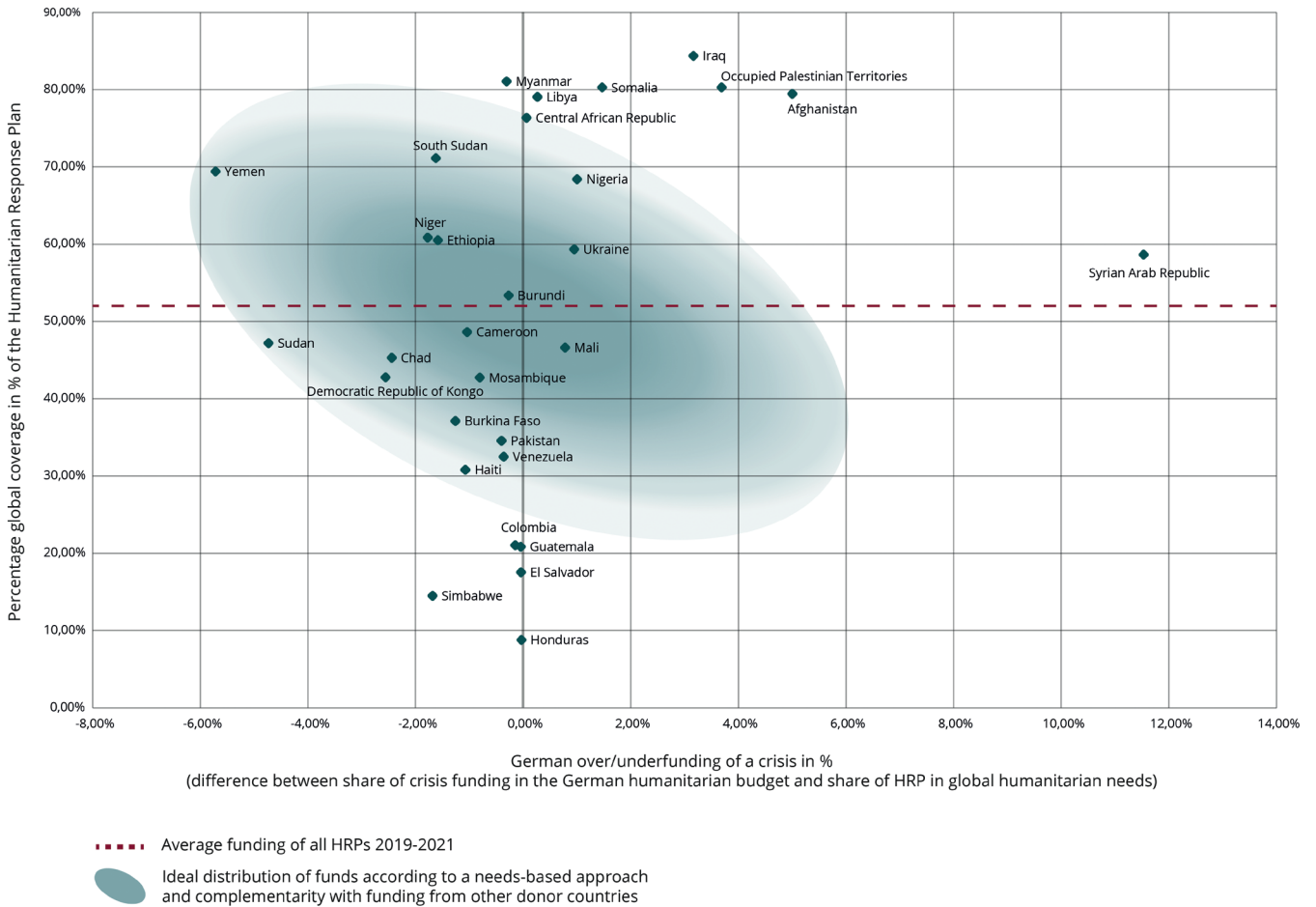


Figure 8: Comparison of global financing of a crisis versus German financing
 Source: Report of the Federal Government on German humanitarian aid abroad 2018-2021; FTS OCHA 2023; Global Humanitarian Overview 2021

fields on the upper left of the graphic, or over-proportional German financing in the context of a relatively poorly funded HRP, as indicated by the fields on the lower right of the graphic. This situation is exemplified in Yemen and Mali. In Yemen, Germany's proportional financial engagement is below the average compared to the proportional needs of this significant humanitarian crisis, as depicted in Figure 7. However, considering the relatively well-funded response plan at around 70 %, this lower engagement is justifiable based on needs. Similarly, the crisis in Mali was financed at a slightly below-average rate of 47 % of the funds made available. At the same time, Germany financed it at a slightly above-average rate. Even Germany's substantial commitment to the Syria crisis resulted in only slightly disproportionate funding of the relief programmes in the region, which were funded at an average of 58 %.

Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that when examining Germany's significant engagement in Iraq, Afghanistan and Palestine, the respective HRPs were financed at approximately 80 % during the observed period, placing them among the best-funded. As a result, the slightly over-proportional German engagement did

contribute to the over-proportional funding of these crises, involving all donors.

Upon examining Germany's under-proportional engagement, it becomes evident that in countries like Sudan, HRPs were still moderately funded on average, even without further contributions from Germany. However, crisis regions such as Zimbabwe and Haiti, which were significantly underfunded at around 14 % and 31 % respectively, remained without allocations from Germany. This is particularly noteworthy given that Germany's humanitarian strategy prioritises the adequate financing of so-called "Forgotten Crises" (Westland, 2023) alongside its needs-oriented approach. In alignment with its strategy and declared value orientation, an over-proportional German engagement would have been deemed appropriate in these crises. Examining these countries reveals a regional trend. While Germany's humanitarian engagement in most crisis countries is needs-oriented and principled, two regions deviate in terms of funding (see Figure 8). In the Middle East,

Germany's humanitarian engagement in most crisis countries is needs-oriented and principled

Germany's engagement is often slightly over-proportional, while in Latin American countries, it tends to be slightly under-proportional. In light of the overall international financial engagement in these regions, this does not align with needs-based funding that aims to balance international trends rather than reinforce them.

Assessing the extent of interest-driven financing reveals a mixed picture. On one hand, the substantial German humanitarian engagement in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan could be attributed to migration policy interests, as explicitly stated by former German Chancellor Angela Merkel in the case of Syria in 2015 (Merkel, 2016). On the other hand, the statistics do not suggest a consistent interest-driven funding strategy. Other crisis contexts relevant to migration policy, such as Mali and Libya, were not fully needs-based funded. Simultaneously, several crises that are relatively irrelevant to European migration policy, such as Venezuela, Myanmar, and the Central African Republic, largely align with a needs-based approach.

This prompts the question of whether the few exceptions to needs-based funding are indicative of a strategic interest or if they result from the interaction among the numerous national and international players, which often lack clear coordination.¹⁰

The strategic focus on "forgotten crises" is reflected only to a limited extent in actual funding

In summary, Germany predominately allocated its humanitarian funding in the years 2019 to 2021 in a needs-oriented and principled manner. This aligns with the international perception of German humanitarian action, reinforcing its credibility and potential for advocating principled humanitarian action among all donor countries and actors. However, from a strategic perspective, it is worth noting that the strategic focus on "forgotten crises" is reflected only to a limited extent in actual funding.

5. Thematic priorities and profile of German humanitarian policy

Germany's credibility as a value-oriented "honest broker" and principled donor is widely recognised internationally, carrying significant potential for the *player Germany* to move humanitarian issues and initiate

Germany's credibility carrying significant potential for the player Germany

crucial reforms in the sector. To assess the extent to which Germany already utilises this potential from the perspective of international

stakeholders, an analysis will be conducted focusing on central thematic areas of humanitarian action. The key question is whether Germany is perceived as a humanitarian actor with a clear thematic profile.

In the survey, participants were asked about the presence of German public actors in seven thematic sectors. A quarter of the respondents identified food security, as well as water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), as key thematic priorities. Healthcare and humanitarian protection follow in third and fourth place. Notably, there are overlaps with the central thematic areas outlined in the humanitarian strategy (see Chap-

Survey results did not point to an explicit thematic focus area in Germany's humanitarian engagement

ter 2). However, survey results did not point to an explicit thematic focus area in Germany's humanitarian engagement. This assessment remains consistent even when respondents based abroad are filtered or when they are clustered by region.

This perception is confirmed by the analysis of the sectors for which German funding is allocated or spent, though this analysis is subject to severe limitations. According to information from the GFFO, there is currently no aggregated data available on the sectors it funds and the corresponding amounts (German Bundestag, 2023). This deficiency is attributed, among other factors, to the digitalisation deficit within the ministry. These circumstances raise fundamental questions about how to establish adequate data and enhance transparency promptly, creating a foundation for strategic and targeted programmatic funding decisions at the GFFO.

¹⁰ The "Principled Aid Index" comes to a similar conclusion about Germany's aid allocation practice, although it analyses the allocation of Official Development Assistance (ODA) funds according to national interests and the global common good. Since the first index was calculated in 2013, Germany has ranked in the middle of the countries analysed for ODA funding. It achieves high scores in the area of "public spiritedness" but lower scores for the orientation of funds towards "development gaps" (Silcock and Gulrajani, 2020; ODI, 2023).

Given the limitations in available data, the UN OCHA's Financial Tracking System (FTS) data on German assistance will be used as a proxy, recognising its limited comparability to the data from the Four Yearly Report on humanitarian action abroad. Taking these limitations into account, the financial flows from the GFFO recorded by the FTS indicate that the majority of funds were allocated to the food security sector. Between 2018 and 2022, between a quarter and three-quarters of German funds were allocated to food aid. Following

Financial flows from the GFFO recorded by the FTS indicate that the majority of funds were allocated to the food security sector

closely is the health sector in second place. Contrary to the perception in the survey, the WASH sector receives a modest but growing share, and the humanitarian protection sector is also receiving an increasing share of German funding. This distribution among sectors, with a significant focus on food security and health, aligns with the funding distribution of many other donors.

There is also no clear prioritisation of the policy issues (Figure 13) of German humanitarian action as perceived by external parties. Here, the survey asked for a total of ten areas in which German engagement is perceived as particularly influential. Prevention and anticipatory action were considered the most influential German policy area (16 % of respondents), closely followed by efforts to improve coordination between humanitarian action, development cooperation, and peace (HDP/Triple Nexus). Regarding other policy issues such as promoting localisation, quality financing, or cash assistance, no clear picture emerges as to where respondents see a focus of the German engagement.

There is also no clear prioritisation of the policy issues of German humanitarian action as perceived by external parties

The diverse picture that emerged from the quantitative survey is also evident in most parts of the interviews. This is reflected in the responses to an open-ended question that asked interviewees to name a particular characteristic of German humanitarian action. "It is noticeable that Germany does not seem to have a real thematic profile," said one donor representative about this shortcoming, which was also seen in other interviews. Smaller European donors, like Sweden, Norway, Switzerland, or the Netherlands, are also more successful in being associated with a thematic profile and topics such as quality funding, gender-based violence (GBV), or mental health, confirms an embassy representative in Geneva.

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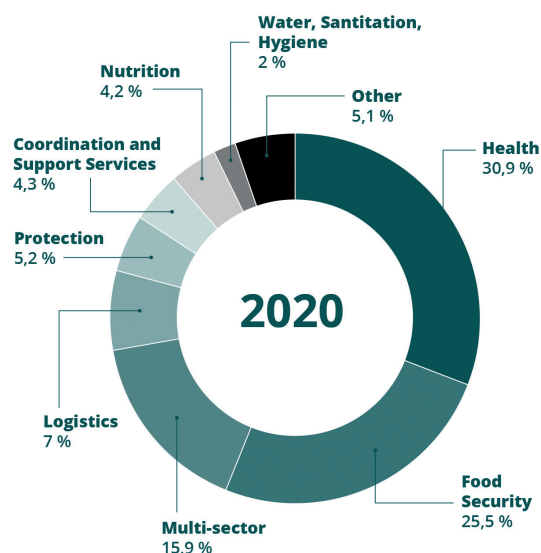


Figure 9: German humanitarian action by sector in 2020

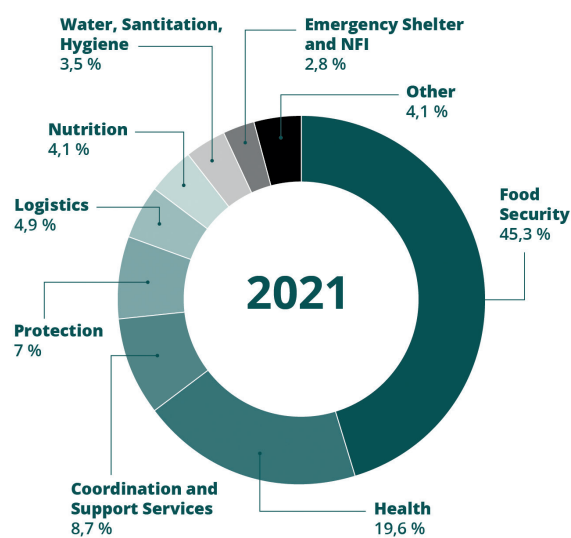


Figure 10: German humanitarian action by sector in 2021

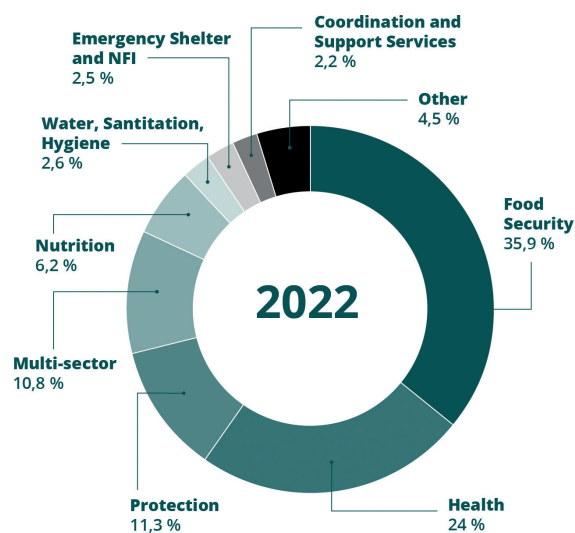


Figure 11: German humanitarian action by sector in 2022
Source Figures 9-11: FTS OCHA 2023

However, the perception differs in most interviews when specifically asked about the leading topic for Germany as a *policy player*, especially in the context of closed questions without specific topics. Within this framework, a clear priority perception and association of Germany with the issue of anticipatory action emerges from around 2021, with more than half of respondents citing it as Germany's top policy priority.

The interviews also revealed a relatively uniform picture regarding other policy topics, with the weighting of these topics varying regionally depending on the location of the interviewees. In European capitals, Germany was associated with multi-year funding and the Grand Bargain, and to a lesser extent also with humanitarian access and IHL. In New York, the feedback focused slightly more on the latter topic, particularly in the context of Germany's membership of the UNSC (2019-2020), its UNSC presidency in 2019, and the Hu-

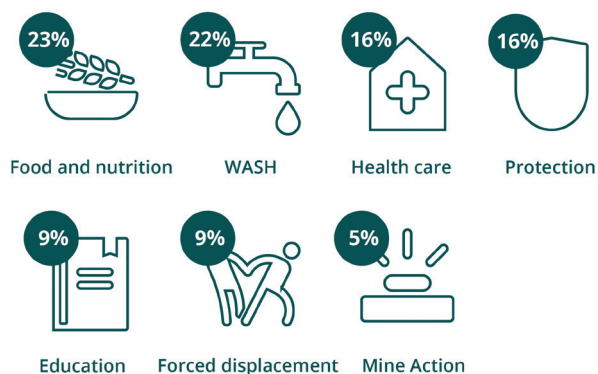


Figure 12: In which thematic areas is Germany particularly present?

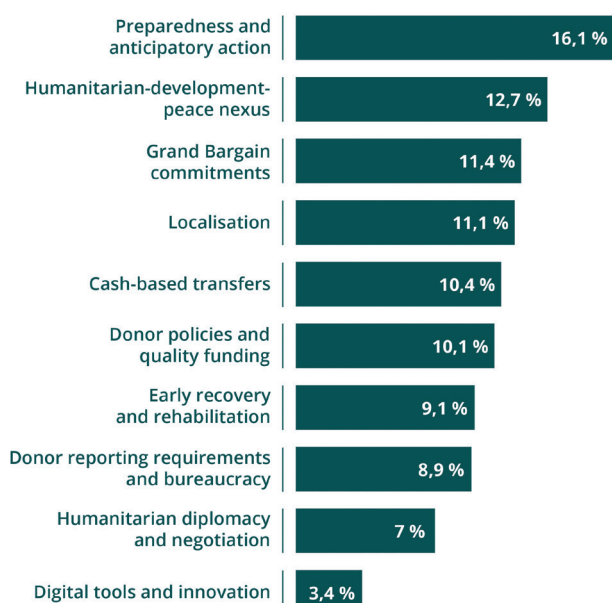


Figure 13: In which policy areas have German public actors been particularly influential?

manitarian Call to Action, which was coordinated together with France (Germany and France, 2019).

In the German Humanitarian Strategy 2019-2023, the German government prioritised three topics: humanitarian access and IHL, innovation in humanitarian action, and "forgotten crises." However, even when asked directly, almost no interviewee connected Germany with the topic of innovation, except when anticipatory action was framed as an innovation. In addition, no interviewee could confirm a German profile or involvement in the field of "forgotten crises" when asked directly.

The limited perception of these thematic priorities by the international community coincides with judgements about Germany's limited capacity to develop a thematic strategy. When asked about Germany's ability to advance a humanitarian policy issue internationally in a similar way to the traditional top donors (the US, the EU Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operation, DG ECHO, and the UK), this ability was largely denied. "It appears that there is not yet really a connecting of the dots," says a donor representative in New York, for instance.

At the same time, one relevant exception should be noted: Numerous Western donor representatives explicitly highlighted the issue of anticipatory action as a strategically and professionally advanced priority. During Germany's successive EU Council Presidencies and G7 Presidencies, the joint international conference on the topic with OCHA and the UK, and in other numerous informal bodies and discussion forums, this focus was well-prepared and far-sightedly addressed by Germany in numerous forums and placed at a high level on the international agenda. "On anticipatory action, we felt very well represented by the Germans, also in all crucial forums like the G7 format. A lot happened there, this was really well done," a donor representative concludes.

From an international perspective, Germany's recent thematic priority on anticipatory action is seen as approaching a *role model* for how Germany should

From an international perspective, Germany's recent thematic priority on anticipatory action is seen as approaching a role model

play and move issues in the future. This perspective aligns with the self-assessment of the German government, which identifies anticipatory action as a leading priority theme

in its most recent four-yearly report. Interestingly, the report hardly addresses the original priority themes of the German humanitarian strategy, innovation, and forgotten crises. Accordingly, it should be noted that no interviewee was able to name a second topic that

Germany had moved as strategically and effectively as anticipatory action in recent years.

This observation also applies to the issue of humanitarian access and IHL, which was occasionally emphasised. Diplomats based in New York confirm that they perceived it as an important topic in the UNSC with the Humanitarian Call for Action, but that “there was no follow-up process” and that “no strategy behind it was discernible”. The humanitarian director of a top donor nation could no longer remember the Humanitarian Call for Action in the interview. Similarly, the strategic link between the topic, specific crises and work on the ground could not be confirmed. Even concerning Syria, the representative of a large local humanitarian organisation complained: „German representatives have been in our exchanges rather interested in the humanitarian situation overall in Syria, but I have never noticed a specific interest in access issues at all. “

There were similar assessments regarding the topic of gender and GBV, which was a priority during Germany’s membership of the Security Council. “It then has been an issue, but there was no follow-up,” criticised one UN representative. Similarly, this focus did not lead to any significant funding from Germany or other Grand Bargain Signatories, for example for local women-led organisations (Latimir and Mollett, 2018). The share of funding received by local women-led organisations in 2022 was only 4.2 % of the total

amount of German assistance provided directly or as directly as possible to local actors. With 18.1 % of all German humanitarian funding, the latter was also below the Grand Bargain target of 25 % (GFFO 2023).

At the same time, the topic is an example of the possibilities Germany has for shaping humanitarian developments and the appreciation the country receives when it sets clear priorities. The representative of a local women-led aid organisation praised the extent to which Germany has recently taken up the issue again: With Germany’s hosting of the Annual Partners Meeting 2023 of the “Call to Action on Protection from Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies” in Berlin in June 2023, to which numerous local organisations were invited, Germany was able to establish a clear profile in this area and is now perceived as a leader in the fight against GBV.

Overall, international stakeholders still perceive a fundamental policy deficit, as summarised by a senior donor representative: “Germany does not yet have either the wideness or the depth. They cannot yet deal with all key topics, and they have not yet the depth to move some topics”.

German representatives have been rather interested in the humanitarian situation overall in Syria, but I have never noticed a specific interest in access issues at all

6. Comparing Germany's policy impact internationally

The quantitative and qualitative surveys on Germany's relative policy impact were aimed at two key questions in particular: To what extent do respondents see an appropriate balance between Germany's financial commitment and its power and willingness to shape policy? And how would they rank Germany's relative policy-shaping influence in comparison with other top donors?

The survey results provide an answer to the questions that show there is still room for improvement. For example, one-third of respondents estimate that Germany's role as the second-largest donor is also reflected in a correspondingly influential policy actor of the humanitarian system. Conversely, one-third of the survey participants disagree with this statement, indicating a more critical stance compared to the other survey data. When the answers are segmented according to professional proximity to the German context, Figure 15 shows that those with good knowledge of Germany as a donor primarily do not (yet) perceive the policy impact to an appropriate degree. Participants with a lower level of professional proximity rated Germany's role more positively.

To contextualise these responses in comparison to other donors, the survey also inquired about the policy influence of the ten largest humanitarian donor countries (according to the DI Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2021). Figure 16 illustrates the number of respondents rating each donor as "very influential". Similar to the interviews, the survey results find that the US (USAID), the European institutions (DG ECHO), and the UK (FCDO) are perceived as particularly influential in shaping policy issues. Germany takes fourth place, followed by Norway and Sweden.

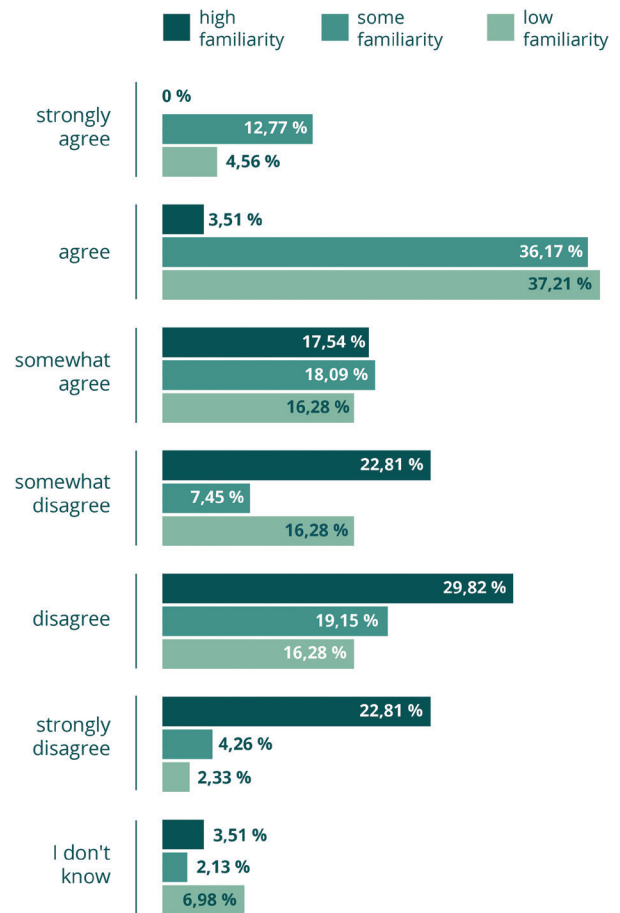


Figure 14: Is Germany's role as the second largest donor reflected in the humanitarian system? (based on familiarity with the German context)

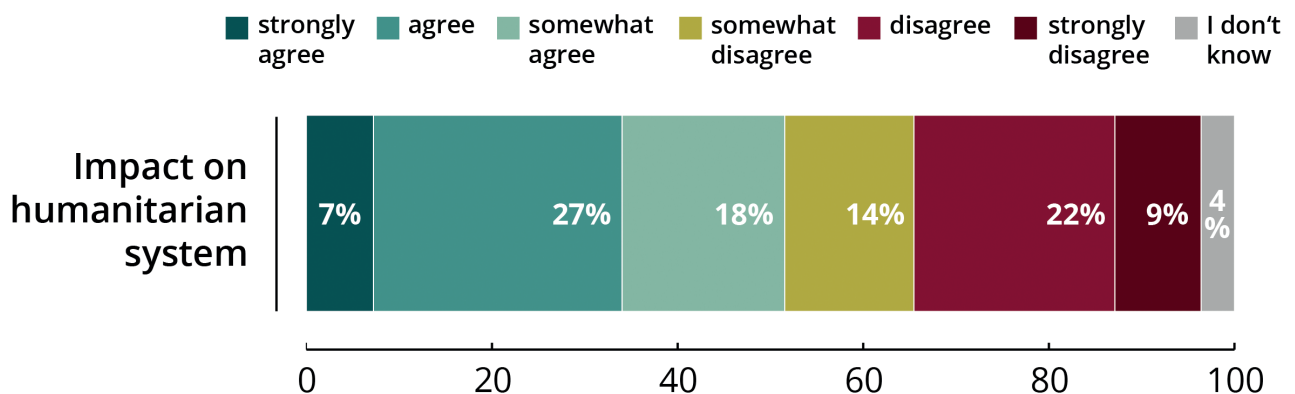


Figure 15: Is Germany's role as the second largest humanitarian donor reflected in its impact on the humanitarian system?

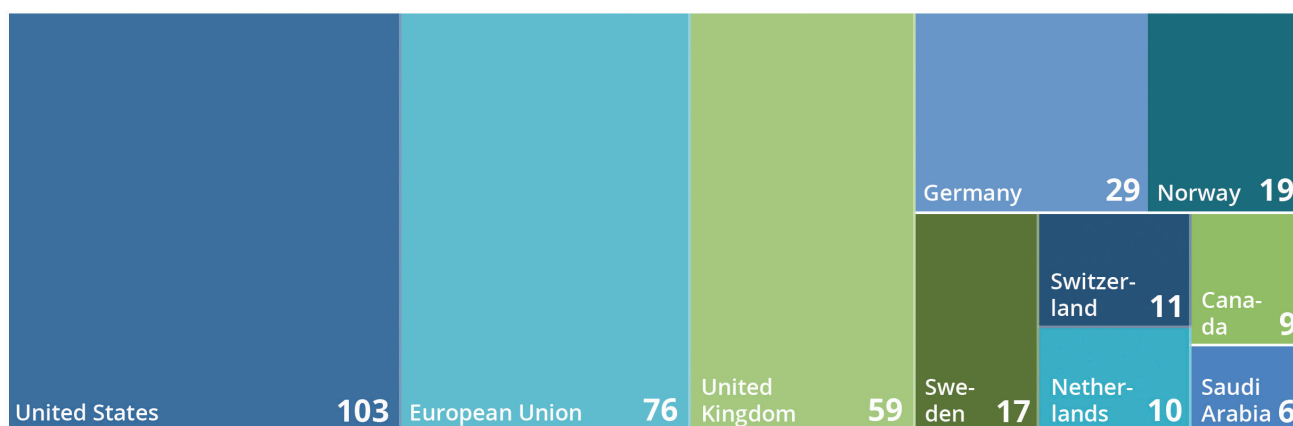


Figure 16: How influential do you perceive the following donors in shaping humanitarian policy? (based on "very influential" answers)

The survey results indicate that participants with relatively good knowledge of German humanitarian action are much more critical of its policy impact

The survey results indicate that participants with relatively good knowledge of German humanitarian action are much more critical of its policy impact. This is further confirmed by the findings of the interviews, most of which were conducted with experts on German policy approaches. The majority of interviewees negated the idea that Germany had already achieved an appropriate balance between financial relevance as a *payer* and formative relevance as a *player*. They saw further great potential for development here, as well as the need for German leadership and commitment. "Its massive budget is not really acknowledged," and "the financial weight doesn't yet match the policy weight," says a representative of an international non-governmental organisation (INGO) at the UN Hub in Geneva.

Simultaneously, there was a consensus among all interviewees who have been following Germany's development for several years that the role of the German government has changed, especially in recent years. It is essential to acknowledge Germany's evolution from an insignificant policy actor, which is now more active and plays a positive and beneficial role in the humanitarian system as a reform- and value-oriented actor. Most respondents expressed a desire for an expanded commitment from Germany: "We want more Germany," is how one UN representative summarises this development.

"We want more Germany"

According to the survey results, most respondents see a continuing difference when it comes to policy influence between the former top three donors (US, DG ECHO, UK) and Germany. Consequently, Berlin's new role as a top two donor nation since 2016 is not yet reflected (OCHA FTS, 2016). In parallel with broader debates on foreign policy, Germany is sometimes seen as a "middle power" in the current humanitarian system. The assessments among respondents of whether Germany is a leading, subordinate, or equal player in this league varied regionally. Numerous interviewees considered Germany as a similarly influential *player* to Sweden or Switzerland, followed by others such as the Netherlands, Norway and Canada. On the other hand, some saw Berlin as clearly leading this group, while several interviewees at the UN Hub in New York, for example, considered Sweden to be a much more relevant player.

Numerous interviewees considered Germany as a similarly influential *player* to Sweden or Switzerland, followed by others such as the Netherlands, Norway and Canada. On the other hand, some saw Berlin as clearly leading this group, while several interviewees at the UN Hub in New York, for example, considered Sweden to be a much more relevant player.

Nevertheless, there was a very broad consensus among the respondents that Sweden, Switzerland and Norway succeed in achieving significant influence as humanitarian actors compared to their financial commitment. Conversely, Germany continues to be perceived as a less relevant *player* compared to its role as a significant *payer* (see Chapter 4).

6.1. Spotlight: Germany's role in the Grand Bargain

Germany's role in the Grand Bargain symbolises the challenging path from *payer* to *player*. Germany has been a signatory to the Grand Bargain since its initiation in 2016. In the process from 2016 to 2021, Germany launched selective initiatives and reform projects, but their impact rarely extended beyond pilot projects and achieved only limited structural changes (Südhoff and Milasiute, 2021). Since the summer of 2021, the GFFO has been a constituent of the state donors in the facilitation group, placing it in a central position to help shape humanitarian policy (Hövelmann, 2022). Germany's role and initiative have grown steadily over the three Grand Bargain iterations.

The Grand Bargain is one of the most comprehensive reform processes in the history of humanitarian action. Since the first "Grand Bargain" was concluded between donor states and aid organisations in Istanbul in 2016, significant efforts have been directed toward key areas such as quality funding, coordination and localisation. After the Grand Bargain's self-imposed target horizon ended in 2021, many saw value in its continuation. Scheduled for two years (2021-2023), 64 signatories agreed to a follow-up process called Grand Bargain 2.0 to promote localisation and increase multi-year and unearmarked funding. In mid-2023, 66 signatories agreed to a third term (Grand Bargain 3.0) extending until 2026.

Germany's role in the humanitarian system at the beginning of the 2.0 process differed significantly in financial terms compared to the first process in 2016. One interviewee surmised that Germany probably would not have been asked to join the steering group in 2016. Nevertheless, according to the same representative, it took "a certain amount of arm-twisting," for Germany to consider constituency representation in the facilitation group alongside DG ECHO. In addition, Berlin required six months to reach a final decision after the UK indicated its withdrawal in the summer of 2021.

Internationally, Germany's commitment is highly appreciated. Both in interviews and the survey, the country's engagement in the Grand Bargain was perceived very positively. As Figure 13 shows, the Grand Bargain was ranked in third place for policy processes in which Germany is particularly present. Interviews revealed a perceptible shift in Germany's visibility as a humanitarian actor. For instance, one respondent from an INGO network stated that "Germany is very visible compared to Italy, France and Spain".

Germany's role in the Grand Bargain symbolises the challenging path from payer to player

For the GFFO, there is a dual obligation to promote the Grand Bargain, as both the *Humanitarian Strategy 2019-2023* and the coalition agreement of the "traffic light" coalition government of 2021-2025 mention the objectives of the reform treaty as a priority (SPD, Bündnis90/The Greens and FDP, 2021). At the same time, it has not been clear where Germany sets its focus in the two fundamental priorities - localisation and quality funding. One interviewee who closely follows the process said: "I'm not sure what policies they are pursuing and where their priorities are". Figure 17 illustrates that only 37 % of respondents perceive Germany as a driver of reform processes, while 16 % do not see any significant reform initiatives from the second-largest donor.

At the beginning of the 2.0 process, the GFFO decided not to participate in the caucuses alongside the steering group due to capacity constraints. However, the area of work on the harmonisation of reporting standards, which was continued from the last iteration and which Germany led together with the International Council of Voluntary Organisations (ICVA), was no longer addressed beyond advocacy efforts around the 8+3 reporting format to simplify various donor reporting requirements (Metcalf-Hough et al., 2022). In the meantime, almost half of the Grand Bargain signatories are using the reporting format, at least in part (Metcalf-Hough et al., 2022). However, the GFFO seems rather reluctant to leverage its weight as a top donor, even though the usefulness of the template has been proven and, for most signatories, it is political will rather than practical hurdles that prevent them from using the format for their project partners (Metcalf-Hough et al., 2022, p. 89).

As in other areas, the limited staff capacities for strategic work and international political processes pose a bottleneck for more policy engagement. Especially when central positions are vacant, this quickly leads to overloading or de-prioritisation of individual portfolios. In this context, the anchoring of the Grand Bargain in the coalition agreement could be a weighty instrument and argument to ensure that the monitoring of international humanitarian policy processes in the GFFO is appropriately staffed.

However, clarity about Germany's role and priorities would also allow existing capacities to be used in the best possible way. One interviewee suggests: "Germany cannot sustain the same level of leadership as the UK with this little staff, but it can strategically utilise other resources to make sure that all this money is

The limited staff capacities for strategic work and international political processes pose a bottleneck for more policy engagement

spent wisely". The new "Grand Bargain beyond 2023" process, also referred to as Grand Bargain 3.0, was launched in the summer of 2023. From the outset, Germany has advocated a continuation and played a key role in driving forward the negotiation processes. The new framework focuses on two areas: the continuation of the priorities of localisation, participation and financing from Grand Bargain 2.0 (focus area 1) and the reduction of needs through anticipatory action, the Triple Nexus and innovative financing (focus

area 2). The GFFO was particularly involved in the process in the second area, namely "shrinking the needs". The GFFO is strengthening the issue of anticipatory action in the Grand Bargain and established a core group for this purpose in the autumn of 2023. The aim is to formulate a problem statement by the end of the year to form a new caucus, according to interviewees. Throughout the Grand Bargain, attempts to achieve a better balance between the *payer* and *player* requirements are also becoming increasingly apparent.

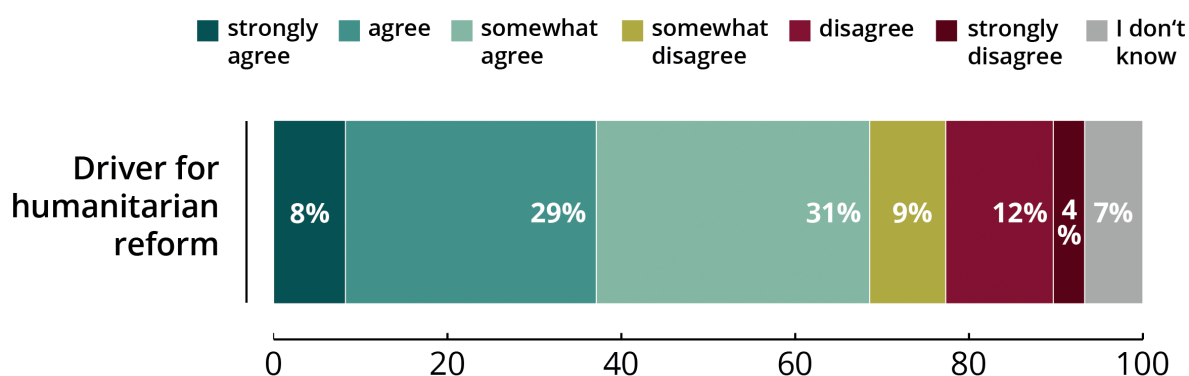


Figure 17: Is Germany a leader in humanitarian reform processes?

7. Strategic capabilities of German humanitarian policies

7.1. Strategies of German policy engagement: Process- versus Policy-Oriented?

The Grand Bargain exemplifies how Germany's representation in central bodies shapes humanitarian policy issues

The Grand Bargain exemplifies how Germany's representation in central bodies shapes humanitarian policy issues. In some cases, Berlin has successfully asserted itself in competition with other donors. German representatives are also active in various UN supervisory boards or bodies such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), International Organization for Migration (IOM), World Food Program (WFP) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and their commitment is praised as being highly professional. However, there is also criticism that the focus is sometimes less oriented toward strategic issues, with an emphasis on formal processes and micro-management. "Sometimes it seems more about rules to be followed and if € 50 have been spent the right way," summarised one donor representative.

Interviewees involved in bodies such as the EU coordination group Council Working Party Humanitarian Aid and Food Aid (COHAFA) or the Grand Bargain Facilitation Group report that German representatives are consistently well prepared, highly professional and committed, and have strong institutional backing. Despite their size, diplomatic missions are described as taking a consultative approach to international policy processes, displaying openness to other perspectives, especially those of smaller donors. This raises the question of whether such a process-moderating role is crucial for the reliability and stability of the system in an international structure strongly determined by agenda-driving actors such as the US, the UK, the EU and, partly, France. One representative of a European donor government saw this as uniquely enabling Germany to moderate and promote international humanitarian policy processes. "It is also important to have such a large actor that can credibly play such a role in a non-biased way so that the processes work."

However, the examples of European coordination and the Grand Bargain also show that a good balance must be found between process facilitation and agenda setting. In the COHAFA Forum, as well as during the EU Council Presidency, Brussels-based interviewees lamented that Germany lacks leadership and orientation at crucial points in its highly consultative approach. The same applies to the Grand Bargain: During a retreat of the Facilitation Group in May 2021, organised by Berlin to develop a work programme, Germany's commitment to an intensive facilitation role was honoured, but it took a back seat in determining the content of what should be acted upon in the facilitation group, according to an interview with an NGO representative. This means that there are moments when policy orientation and leadership are necessary but missed. The approach of non-partisan facilitation versus more obvious issue-setting leads to the perception that processes are placed above policies: "For the Germans, it seems to be all about processes, but which policies shall be moved in these?" asked an NGO representative in the inter-

Germany's more self-confident appearance in the context of the Grand Bargain 3.0 could be an indication that it will play a stronger leadership role in the future

view. It was emphasised in interviews that at the end of a process, the approach could be more decisive: "In Berlin, there is a tendency to think things through very carefully first. However, one can dare to say: we have been working on this for six years, this is how we do it now," (interview donor representative). Germany's more self-confident appearance in the context of the Grand Bargain 3.0 could be an indication that it will play a stronger leadership role in the future beyond a balancing moderation.

The analyses suggest that a middle way in the international humanitarian system could be a helpful role for Germany. On the one hand, promoting process consistency and trust in international coordination mechanisms, and on the other hand, implementing a rigorous prioritisation process that offers more clarity internally to all hierarchical levels regarding where the GFFO sets priorities and goals in these processes. This prioritisation should be as result-oriented as possible, determining where and how issues should be moved. "The Germans could do better at senior level. I don't get the feeling they decide on that level what they strategically want to achieve with partners, and where they want to head to," says a UN representative, highlighting Germany's lack of prioritisation of policies over processes.

7.2. Levels of German humanitarian policy practice: soft power and hard power

Influence can materialise in various ways, especially in the field of diplomacy. In the context of this analysis, it is important to differentiate between the use of *hard power* instruments and *soft power* instruments. These criteria have proven to be helpful in analysing and differentiating Germany's influence and the respective instruments at these levels (see Box 1).

In the international perception, Germany's *hard power* in the humanitarian field is indisputable. Berlin's substantial financial commitment, which has made it the second-largest donor internationally and a top donor to numerous international humanitarian organisations and non-governmental organisations, represents a considerable financial *hard power* potential unmatched by any other actor today apart from the US and DG ECHO. This development goes hand in hand with the fact that Germany is now more prominently represented in the relevant humanitarian bodies and international forums, UN management levels and supervisory bodies, presenting a much greater presence than in the past. In addition, Germa-

In the international perception, Germany's hard power in the humanitarian field is indisputable

Definition of soft power vs. hard power

"According to Nye (2004), soft power in this context is understood as the ability of an actor to win others over or persuade them to make a decision in their own interest without using coercive measures. Soft power is based on the persuasive and attractive power of the actors, which lends them credibility in the eyes of others. Instruments of soft power include means such as the dialogue-oriented use of diplomacy, the promotion of one's own values and political structures (public diplomacy), as well as long-term investment in the stability of inter-state or international relations (e.g., through development cooperation), which is possible in various policy areas. Soft power stands in contrast to hard power, which involves traditional forms of military, economic and financial power used to exert pressure on third parties. Stanley R. Sloan and Heiko Borchert argue that the two types of power should be understood as complementary. In their view, soft power and hard power politics and the respective resources are most effective when used in combination. Soft power can help legitimise hard power" (Voss-Wittig, 2006).

Box 1: Definition of soft power vs. hard power

ny's economic strength and political power coincide with relevant structural leadership roles and memberships, such as the G7 presidency, most recently in 2015 and 2022, substantial influence in the role of the EU Council presidency, and recurring memberships in the UNSC as a non-permanent member.

Germany's financial *hard power* has also led to its recent membership in an informal Top 4 donor group, alongside the US, DG ECHO, and the UK. A representative of this group said in an interview that Germany was invited to join the previous top three group not so much for *soft power* reasons such as competence or know-how, but because of its financial *hard power*: "We simply wanted to have them on the table, as they are the top two donor."

In the perception of international stakeholders, however, Germany's potential *hard power* has only materialised to a very limited extent in the humanitarian field. "Germany has so much financial power, it is hard to understand why they don't use it more," one UN representative criticised Berlin for not doing more agenda-setting.

The interviewees cited two main reasons to explain this difference to other top donors: First, the lack of strategic priorities that would be pursued in all fields and forums of German *hard power* – except for the topic of anticipatory action, as described, which was consistently advanced in all relevant structures and financially supported. "You have to come via topics here (...), so you need to be very prioritised like others do," says a UN representative in New York. This impression is confirmed by an analysis of Germany's influence in the development sector. Chen et al. (2023) concludes: "While its resource envelope, financial levers and institutional structures give it the greatest capacity for instrumentalisation among our four donors, Germany has continued to underplay the development power that it has at its disposal".

Secondly, interviewees perceive German restraint, sometimes also a "false modesty," as an obstacle to utilising existing *hard power*. Many of the interviewees identified this as communicative reticence. On the one hand, they praised Germany's willingness to listen and learn, but on the other hand, they criticised that Germany does not take the lead at critical points in the process and bring them to a conclusion. "They are rather the silent force," says a donor representative from New York. "You could see the difference, for example, looking at the French approach to running its EU Council presidency, and the German one," a Brussels donor representative highlights. "France basically came with a set agenda and said that's the way forward." France's approach, with a relatively small financial humanitarian commitment that does not prevent Paris from being very self-con-

fidant on humanitarian policy issues, was criticised by several interviewees. At the same time, interviewees stated that Germany often threatened to lapse into the other extreme and was too unwilling to take a position even during processes and after consultations had taken place. "Germany typically facilitates exchanges, while if no agreement can be reached, it concludes that no decision can be taken rather than leading and guiding into a direction," summarised one European diplomat.

"What I haven't seen at all from the Germans is the use of soft power, and that despite their financial power. I don't see any constructive soft power at all."

Berlin's perceived lack of will to strategically use its *hard power* is combined with a perceived weakness that many interviewees summed up as follows: "The *soft power* is not there yet," says one NGO network representative. Another INGO representative adds, "What I haven't seen at all from the Germans is the use of *soft power*, and that despite their financial power. I don't see any constructive *soft power* at all."

Characteristics of German engagement that were mentioned by interviewees as detrimental to increased *soft power* included a pronounced "formal focus" on the respective forms and forums of joint policy exchange. The very professional and committed appearance in committees, as described, contrasts with a rather weaker commitment in informal contexts and on informal occasions. "I almost never get an invitation to the German mission, coordination is non-existent," says the representative of a top donor, "while, for example, Sweden is a very reliable partner. We pick up the phone anytime, and Sweden and the EU convene a lot of stuff." Another diplomat draws a direct comparison to Sweden's *soft power*: "Sweden is surely often engaged and often on a high level, while there is surely still space for bridge building, networking, etc. on the German side."

A Geneva diplomat shared similar experiences, stating: "It comes as a surprise that somehow I have not met with the Germans over lunch or coffee in the past years." In almost all the contexts covered in the interviews, the practice of *wining and dining*, which is widespread in diplomacy for the informal promotion of one's own concerns, was not considered to be very pronounced in the German humanitarian environment.

Other donor representatives also indicated a limited willingness to participate in joint donor trips to crisis contexts, where close relationships can develop among colleagues over several days and strategic cooperation can be initiated. "We believe it is important to go on these missions although we do have humanitarian staff in the embassies", comments one donor

representative, “that’s why I wonder why the Germans are never joining”.

Visibility was another aspect that interviewees cited as a lack of prioritisation of *soft power* aspects on the German side. “Here in New York, it is all about visibility, but Germany does not yet play that game, so it would be good to be much more vocal,” said one UN representative. Another donor representative also identified a structural problem, as Germany too often co-signs a joint statement by the EU delegation instead of taking the initiative itself. This leads to a conflict of objectives, as Germany’s role and commitment are not visible in many contexts, while its own statements and positions could continuously underpin Germany’s standing, similar to the practice of other EU states such as Sweden and the Netherlands.

Visibility was another aspect that interviewees cited as a lack of prioritisation of soft power aspects on the German side

Germany is also perceived as having limited activity in informal coordination groups, such as the approximately 150 thematic “Group of Friends” forums in New York. In these forums, donors coordinate informally, and Germany’s participation is considered limited. The same applies to coordination roles in relevant processes, such as the “omnibus resolution” on humanitarian issues within the framework of the annual UN General Assembly, a role typically taken on by Sweden, providing information, *soft power* and visibility, according to the assessment of several interviewees. This is also reflected in the respective consul-

tation processes in Geneva, which take place from the Scandinavian side. “I have asked myself why we are always in the lead on this,” confirms a Scandinavian representative, “but I heard other states including Germany never asked to play a role in this.” A UN representative adds, “if the Germans are the pen holder, they do a great job (...) But I can’t really name an area where they do this right now.”

This feedback from international donors aligns with the perceptions of local actors operating in crisis regions. Even in crises that attract considerable German attention, local actors criticised a lack of exchange,

Feedback from international donors aligns with the perceptions of local actors operating in crisis regions

transparency about responsibilities and presence in informal formats or soft skill-relevant forms of communication. “It is very hard to engage,” complained a representative in Turkey, while the

director of a Lebanese humanitarian organization criticised the lack of communication with the German embassy. “They are creating a lot of layers when it comes to interaction and communication,” summarises one representative.

Concerning Germany’s informal engagement, a local representative confirms: “Germans are not that engaged in collective meetings and gatherings (...) the level of engagement of other donors is more visible, for example, the EU.” Another representative confirms that there is very little exchange and subsequently complains that there is “not much knowledge about the German profile”.

7.3. Germany's structural and institutional set-up and related challenges

As the interviews indicated, structural and institutional aspects play a major role in assessing perceptions of

Structural and institutional aspects play a major role in assessing perceptions of German public humanitarian actors and their influence

German public humanitarian actors and their influence. This concerns both intra-institutional structures within the GFFO and its missions as well as inter-institutional structures. “You have so many different agencies

and I’m completely lost who is who, who is which ministry, what is the GIZ part, etc.,” says an experienced humanitarian director of a Western European donor country. There was a broad consensus among the interviewees on the following points, regardless of the location and background of the interviewee:

- German structures and procedures often appear very complex and non-transparent to external partners and are sometimes an obstacle to intensive exchange and cooperation. “The German setup is not concise due to this fracturing of expertise at the mission; there is some structure missing below the ambassador level. At all other embassies, I have one counterpart to deal with, while at the German [embassy] there are four different ones,” criticises a donor representative in New York. At the same time, intransparency can combine with conflicting competencies and conflicting approaches and policies depending on the German actors involved, as several interviewees noted: “Structures are sometimes undermining the coherence of much welcomed humanitarian policies, for example, Germany’s support against counter-terrorism sanctions. But if you talk at the same time with their bank KfW, they ap-

pear like a Trojan horse in the German house,” complains a UN representative.

- In Germany, frequent staff rotations pose a significant obstacle to building trust, personal relationships and longer-term cooperation. This is particularly notable at the higher working level, which is not only affected by regular rotations but also by reshuffles in the wake of political changes of power, such as the 2021/2022 federal elections. “This work is very personal, if you don’t build ties and trust, this won’t work here,” says a New York embassy representative. “If you leave after three years, it is not worth posting somebody here.” Another donor representative complains about recent staff changes at the highest level: “It is a problem if you deal with three different director generals within a year.”
- The limited expertise on humanitarian action of the staff was also mentioned several times as a reason for the following perception of the strengths and weaknesses of German policy contributions: In almost all interviews, there was a consensus that, on the one hand, Germany is always well prepared and contributes well-founded and structured statements to the relevant forums and bodies with a highly professional appearance. On the other hand, it was frequently noted that beyond these prepared statements, German counterparts often lack the necessary speaking ability and flexibility to actively engage in evolving questions and debates within the framework of a process, hindering their ability to drive the discussions forward. According to one diplomat, “German diplomats are not coming with a specific expertise to weigh in on big debates.” This widely acknowledged weakness was linked to a potential lack of experience, more hierarchical structures and reporting lines, and a culture that seems to require constant reassurance on all points with headquarters. “German colleagues are very reserved in these more open debates, and much more sitting on the fence than others,” notes a European counterpart. The same applies to the external structures, where a UN representative states: “German embassy staff is always a ‘reporter’ to Berlin, they are rarely actively shaping the discussion, and the conversation is driven by the trilateral of US, EU and UK.”

Interviewees at the humanitarian hubs in New York and Geneva expressed a similar restraint regarding the communication on humanitarian crisis contexts and German expertise in these areas. “The UK and US for example have a real impact in informal settings, probably much helped by their missions abroad. They are very well connecting the dots,” said one donor representative in Geneva. “If donors have no way of filtering the intel they get from agencies, they are easy to confuse and easy to convince,” says a UN representative. Christoph Heusgen, former German ambassador to the UN in New York, admits that this is a fundamental structural problem: “German embassies are relatively small, especially in countries where the biggest humanitarian crises are raging.”¹¹ Several interviewees identified a clear link between German staff rotation and the lack of knowledge management and institutional memory as a basis for medium-term cooperation and policy processes. This also applied to high-level processes that Germany had initially initiated at great expense, for example during its EU Council Presidency. “How do you ensure a continued process and progress on the topics moved during an EU council presidency, when shortly after no counterpart on the German side is anymore in place?” asked a donor representative from Brussels. Stakeholders in New York also observed limited continuity on the German side since its membership in the UNSC. The lack of knowledge management within the GFFO is a recurring concern in confidential discussions among representatives of German civil society.

11 Expert discussion of the political party Bündnis 90 / The Greens “The way to a National Security Strategy”, 11 October 2022

8. Summary and recommendations

Against the backdrop of Germany's emergence as the second-largest donor, this research paper examines the international perceptions of German humanitarian engagement. The analysis is centred on exploring Germany's motives and interests, assessing its potential, and evaluating the impact of its involvement in humanitarian efforts.

When scrutinising the motives, values and interests behind German humanitarian action, respondents view Germany as an honest broker that operates in a principled and credible manner. This perception is more favourable among international stakeholders than among those based in Germany. An examination of the financial flows associated with German humanitarian action confirms that the country predominately funds based on needs and principles. This coherence and credibility provide substantial potential for Germany to shape and reform the humanitarian system in response to acknowledged reform necessities.

Respondents view Germany as an honest broker that operates in a principled and credible manner

Nevertheless, Germany's potential remains underutilised, particularly in terms of the themes and priorities it chooses to pursue. Here, the issue of anticipatory action serves as a positive example of how humanitarian issues are strategically set and introduced in various forums. However, beyond this, there is a strategic deficit in the ongoing advancement of humanitarian policy issues through various bodies and processes. Germany has yet to address the full spectrum of humanitarian issues or delve into selected priority areas with the necessary depth.

This perception is accompanied by a sense of disparity between Germany's financial commitment on one hand and its policy power and policy impact on the other. However, this imbalance has diminished in recent years as Germany has assumed a more permanent role in shaping humanitarian policy issues through international processes like the Grand Bargain and its leadership and presidency of multilateral forums.

Despite these positive developments, there are significant challenges arising from the current structure and administrative resources. Notably, the constraints on

human resources for humanitarian actions, both in terms of quantity and expertise, present a considerable obstacle. This limitation stems from short staff rotation periods, leading to a shortage of skilled personnel. Concurrently, the substantial staff deficit in German humanitarian units, particularly when compared to other donor governments, is not acknowledged by the ministerial leadership.¹² Furthermore, German personnel find themselves in policy debates competing with other donor governments that are often far better equipped, possess more thematic expertise and boast a longer humanitarian policy tradition. In this context, the underdeveloped external structures in decentralised crisis contexts and embassies are perceived as a major deficit.

The analysis of German humanitarian policy engagement reveals two distinct patterns of action. Germany's consultative and cooperative approach is well-regarded by international stakeholders, setting it apart from other leading donors that tend to be more agenda-driven. Nevertheless, instances like the Grand Bargain or the German EU Presidency demonstrate that the non-partisan facilitation approach, as opposed to a more direct issue-setting strategy, can create a perception that prioritises processes over policies. Furthermore, despite or because of its financial influence, there remains significant untapped potential for German diplomats in the area of *soft power* to advance issues with partners. Noteworthy initiatives at the Berlin level, led by the GFFO, include a first-ever in-depth consultation with the US government in Berlin, a meeting between German and Scandinavian representatives (Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland) and regular bilateral exchange formats with "like-minded" partners such as Switzerland.

¹² "I think if you look at the human resources, we are in a pretty good, efficient and effective position with effective procedures. It's not just the number of staff that makes the difference, but we also have - in absentia - a much higher budget." State Secretary Susanne Baumann at the opening speech of the CHA conference on 23 November 2022 (#CHA22 Keynote & Opening panel: Do we need a Humanitarian Zeitenwende in Europe? [German/English], 2022).

Recommendations for action

The perceptions of international actors outlined in this research paper, along with the analyses of German humanitarian action results, lead to the following recommendations for the German government as it transitions from humanitarian *payer* to *player*:

- Germany currently faces limitations in addressing a broad spectrum of humanitarian issues compared to other top donors. Therefore, a strategic approach of focusing on clearly prioritised topics, akin to the successful model employed in the area of anticipatory action, could significantly enhance Germany's strategic performance. Emphasising prioritisation to refine the country's profile and influence is important and advisable, especially in the forthcoming development of the Strategy 2024-2027. At the same time, the strategy should guarantee that the prioritisation of a few well-defined topics is supported by corresponding shifts in resources and concrete implementation steps. Investments should be made in effective communication and alignment both internally and externally, between Berlin and the mission.
- Through a more strategic and thematic prioritisation, Germany has the potential to progress beyond a *process orientation* to a *policy orientation*, aligning discussions with its objectives in various forms. To achieve this transition successfully, Germany should evaluate and identify key processes that can be leveraged to develop reform-oriented *policies*.
- Strategic prioritisation in the policy area should be complemented by prioritisation in the programme area, necessitating a significant enhancement in data availability and transparency. Discussions on strategic issues within the GFFO become obsolete when they lack financial and programmatic monitoring and tracking capabilities. Similarly, the transparency surrounding funding allocation remains opaque and unclear in its criteria for external humanitarian actors. In addressing these challenges, models like France's "Centre de crise et de soutien (CDCS) Call for Projects" could serve as a template (Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères, 2023). Adopting such an approach would allow key issues of the strategy to be tackled collaboratively with partners, concurrently enhancing transparency by clearly specifying priorities for all stakeholders. Ensuring greater consistency of funds and increasing their flexibility, particularly through expanding flexible programme funding versus small-scale project funding, is imperative in achieving these objectives.
- Closer and more strategic cooperation with other actors is recommended, surpassing mere information exchange. In this context, Germany possesses substantial potential to address a significant gap among the top donors, positioning itself as a perceived "honest broker" to promote such cooperation based on its credibility and financial *hard power*.
- Strategic cooperation with specific partners with complementary skills should be pursued more intensively. Notably, the potential for closer collaboration with DG ECHO has been raised several times, offering Germany, with its limited human resources, opportunities to collaborate with DG ECHO more strategically. By leveraging ECHO's capacities and decentralised structures, Germany can identify and collaboratively address joint *policy issues*. Efforts by the GFFO, including responses to previous CHA analyses, to promote enhanced cooperation in the humanitarian field between German embassies and EU representations represent steps in the right direction.
- Urgent investments are needed in significantly expanding staff numbers, as well as their qualifications and seniority. In this context, limiting staff rotation would be beneficial, taking inspiration from models such as Canada's quantitative approach, where a core of humanitarian staff remains non-rotational, or the Swiss rotation model in thematically related areas. If adopting the former Department for International Development (DfID) model of full staff continuity is not feasible, exploring alternatives that allow for greater staff stability would be beneficial. In a positive development, the GFFO introduced a new approach in 2023. This allows a large proportion of fixed-term staff to pursue a permanent "non-technical career" within the GFFO. Additionally, certain positions have been exempted from the rotation principle, making a step forward in addressing the need for more stable staffing structures.
- A cultural change, signalling an end to Germany's traditional "foreign policy restraint", is needed in the humanitarian sphere. This transformation should include a) a reduced reluctance to use Germany's financial *hard power* when required to advance reform, and b) a more distinct profile and increased leadership through enhanced visibility and *soft power* skills. In this way, a new balance could emerge between the well-regarded culture of listening and restraint and the imperative for leadership and the pursuit of Germany's strategic priorities.

- Centralised decision-making structures should be rendered more flexible and de-bureaucratised to diplomatically leverage the full scope of all hierarchical levels and locations. This adjustment aims to empower all employees, enabling them to actively participate in result-oriented prioritisation processes and strategic goal setting.
- In pursuit of Germany's aspiration to play an active role in shaping and reforming the international humanitarian system, the country should continue to refine its strategic policy approaches. The goal is to utilise its financial and political influence in a targeted manner, addressing central weaknesses in the current humanitarian system. This involves spearheading reform-oriented changes both within and beyond established structures and processes.
- To achieve this, Germany should develop a clear vision of its role within the humanitarian system and delineate its responses to the question of whether the current humanitarian system is "fit for purpose" and where reforms are imperative. Additionally, Germany should determine whether and to what extent it is willing to proactively drive reforms itself, particularly in areas like fostering a humanitarian system that prioritises local actors. As a relative "newcomer", Germany has the potential to play a distinct and influential role among top donors in this context and on its journey from *payer* to *player* in international humanitarian action.
- In terms of external communication, the GFFO in Berlin should develop a unified narrative to strengthen missions abroad and other external structures in effectively communicating the strategic goals and priorities of German humanitarian engagement.

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