



**Global Partnership
Network**

Policy Paper 1 · Nov 2025

International cooperation in a neocolonial world

Learnings from the GPN
experience – Policy Paper

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Design / Layout: Nina Sangenstedt, gestaltvoll.de

GPN Working Papers

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17170/kobra-2025100711494>

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First published 11 / 2025 in Kassel, Germany

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1 Executive Summary

Germany wants to decolonise its development cooperation – this objective is clearly stated by the BMZ and is at the heart of the [Global Partnership Network](#) (GPN). The GPN is a centre of '[Higher Education Excellence in Development Cooperation](#)' (exceed) funded by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) with funds from the German Ministry of Development Cooperation (BMZ). Consisting of 12 universities and 15 civil society organisations, mostly from the Global South, the network has for the last 5 years endeavoured to reduce power asymmetries in its own everyday practice of international cooperation, particularly between the Global North and the Global South. It pursues a reflexive, dialogue-based and self-critical approach in order to counteract colonial continuities in '[development](#)' cooperation and, as far as the framework in which it operates allows, to restructure global partnerships on the basis of recognition and solidarity. An external evaluation, methodologically based on individual and group interviews and an internal network workshop, helped to identify existing power asymmetries in the network. The insights gained were used to make structural changes and as part of our reflection process we are writing this policy paper. As a project that tries to free itself as much as possible from colonial patterns, we would like to use our internal learning process to inspire other actors in development cooperation and development policy. Because the industrialisation and current prosperity of Western Europe and North America would be unthinkable without the enormous [exploitation of people through enslavement and forced labour, transfers of precious metals and resources over five centuries of colonialism and neocolonialism](#). In this respect, there is a historical debt that forms the background for current policies.

The 12 most important recommendations from 5 years of GPN experience:

1. **Democratising the budget**
2. **Democratising decision-making processes**
3. **Decentring places of knowledge production**
4. **Strengthening South-South cooperation**
5. **Taking climate justice seriously**
6. **Redistribution from North to South**
7. **Direct cooperation with civil society in the global South**
8. **Simplifying bureaucracy and accounting**
9. **Support for marginalised groups**
10. **Inclusive communication**
11. **Addressing power asymmetries in global partnerships**
12. **Reflexivity, evaluation and self-criticism**



2 International cooperation in a neocolonial world

Learnings from the GPN experience – Policy Paper

Since the end of 2021, German politics has clearly set itself the goal of overcoming colonial continuities through the [coalition agreement of the SPD / FDP / Green party government](#) (2021, p. 100). In March 2023, the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) presented a new [strategy for feminist development policy](#), which declares that racist patterns of thought and other colonial continuities in German development cooperation must be dismantled in the sense of a post-colonial, anti-racist development policy (BMZ, 2023, p.11). This requires continuous institutional reflection on one's own role and position of power as well as a critical examination of one's own understanding of what good "[development](#)" actually is (Ziai, 2013; BMZ, 2023, p.11). How such processes of reflection and debate with the aim of decolonising development cooperation actually look in practice and what changes they should entail, however, remains rather vague in the strategy. While academia has made numerous contributions to the discussion on the decolonisation of development cooperation, including under the keyword 'post-development', contributions on the topic explicitly aimed at practitioners are rather rare: these include the paper '[Postcolonialism & Post-Development: Practical Perspectives for Development Cooperation](#)' (Kornprobst et al., 2020), the brochure '[Mainstreaming Decolonise: Koloniale Kontinuitäten in der Entwicklungspolitik](#)' (BER, 2022), the VENRO publication '[Shifting Power: How development and humanitarian NGOs can address the consequences of colonialism in their work](#)' (Dombrowski, 2022), '[Decolonising Aid: Perspectives from Civil Society in Franco-phone Sub-saharan Africa](#)' (WACSI, 2023), and '[Decolonising Foreign Funding Policies from Localised Contexts in Kenya, India and Bangladesh](#)' (Kashyap & Dwivedi, 2025).

More than a year before the previous German government was formed, the [Global Partnership Network](#) (GPN) (University of Kassel, n.d.–a) had already been established as a centre of '[Higher Education Excellence in Development Cooperation](#)' (exceed) funded by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) with funds from the BMZ, one of the programme objectives of which is for German universities to acquire expertise in development cooperation (DAAD, n.d.). In this sense, this policy paper serves to share the knowledge gained through practice from almost 5 years of GPN experience with regard to development cooperation with actors in development policy, but also with the general public interested in development policy. Since its conception in 2019, the GPN has been trying to reduce power asymmetries in international cooperation – as far as we can under the given framework conditions. This gives it a certain pioneering role and leads us to believe that valuable lessons for other practical projects and concrete political guidelines for decolonising development cooperation can be drawn from its successes and failures.

The GPN is a network of 12 universities and 15 civil society organisations in 12 countries, all of which are located in the Global South except Germany. The network has university and civil society partners in Jamaica, Haiti, Senegal, Ghana, Togo, Burkina Faso, Uganda, Ethiopia, South Africa, Iran and India. As a result, perspectives from different regional contexts inform the collaborative work and the negotiations on issues of power asymmetries and reflected partnership. In the spirit of Goal 17 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), “global partnership for sustainable development”, the GPN has set itself the goal of realising global partnership in a way that does justice to an increasingly multipolar 21st century, while being aware of historical atrocities, injustices and colonial continuities. The explicit aim is to reduce asymmetrical power relations between the global North and South.

The GPN’s reflexive and dialogue-based approach, which consists of ensuring that the network operates and makes decisions using grassroots democratic means wherever possible, also includes self-criticism and the attempt to adapt structures and procedures in line with the overarching goal of reflexive partnership that is critical of entrenched power dynamics. For example, the GPN commissioned an external evaluation to look at power asymmetries within the GPN itself from the perspective of the Global South. Dr Kadamawe Knife from the University of the West Indies in Mona, Jamaica, carried out an initial evaluation about half-way through the project, for which he gained insight into internal and external GPN documents, but above all conducted numerous anonymised individual and group interviews with GPN members online and during the GPN conference in October 2022 in presence. While the aim of this phase was to give the partners space for criticism without them having to fear negative consequences, the workshop on North-South asymmetries in the GPN, which was held jointly with everyone, including participants from the institutions of the Global North, provided a space for dialogue-based, self-critical reflection within the network. A 54-page evaluation report concluded Dr Knife’s assignment. Since then, the GPN team has endeavoured to implement structural changes based on these findings. This has involved various follow-up and dialogue processes, including structured monitoring of the ‘Matrix of Change’ initiated and further developed by Dr Knife. In this sense, this policy paper is largely based on findings from the external evaluation report and subsequent evaluation and dialogue formats and it therefore represents an attempt at a concrete and practical implementation of the principles of partner orientation and participation named in the German development strategy of a “post-colonial development policy”. (BMZ, 2023, p.17).

The following are the most important recommendations from 5 years of GPN experience:

1. Democratising the budget

It is not the Northern donor who decides alone which activities are to be funded and with how much budget, but all participants jointly and on an equal footing, including the Southern partners. This is central to collective ownership.

***GPN example:** All important budget decisions are made in the International Steering Committee (ISC), in which all 12 university and 15 civil society partners are formally equally involved in the decision-making process (consensus principle, majority principle only in case of enduring conflict, online meetings with simultaneous translation). All interested partners are also invited to the preparatory meetings that pre-structure the ISC's selection decisions based on formal criteria in order to avoid unequal access to information and informal decision-making hierarchies. The tasks of the ISC include the selection of projects and scholarship holders worthy of funding as well as the control of the entire budget, including reallocations to other budget lines.*

2. Democratising decision-making processes

All participants organise the collaboration together. This includes the joint definition of rules and procedures for joint activities or the criteria for the internal allocation of funds, as well as the selection of thematic priorities and the decision-making processes in general.

***GPN example:** Rules for the selection of scholarship holders and associates are jointly established and expanded in the ISC (based on the requirements of the DAAD as a donor), as are the principles for funding projects ('[Good practice for funding in the GPN](#)' (University of Kassel, n.d.–b)). The same applies to process decisions on how or whether the network should open up to other new partners and, if so, to which partners. The thematic priorities for the DAAD application had to be defined in advance – without the later partners.*

3. Decentring places of knowledge production

In many North-South collaborations, it is still the unwritten rule that either **a)** researchers from the global North research the global South, which is therefore mostly reduced to a role as a site for data extraction, or that **b)** so-called technical experts from the global North “teach” their acquired knowledge to the global South. In contrast, valuable knowledge exists equally in the global South: at universities and (partly as applied and/or traditional knowledge) in civil society organisations or even in everyday practices – this potential should be used much more.

***GPN example:** Experts for workshops come from and live in countries of the workshop location (or in exceptional cases in other network partner countries in the Global South, see also 4.); scholarships are primarily based at universities in the Global South; visiting professors from the Global South teach at the University of Kassel; research stays focus on South-South exchange (see 4.), some GPN partner organisations are involved in the decolonisation of knowledge or participatory action research; civil society organisations carry out research projects together with partner universities, which sometimes draw their relevance from practice.*

4. Strengthening South-South cooperation

This means that the focus should not be on unilateral knowledge transfer from North to South, as is too often common in development cooperation, but on mutual learning and South-South exchange (see also 3. and BMZ (2023, p.16)).

***GPN example:** The GPN attaches great importance to the special promotion of South-South mobility and guest research stays are usually only funded in this constellation; research projects require at least two GPN partner organisations in order to promote South-South exchange here as well; doctoral students are jointly supervised by professors from two partner universities; the internal review of working papers in the network is mostly carried out by GPN colleagues and scientists from other southern contexts.*

5. Taking climate justice seriously

The Global South suffers the most from climate change, which is why air travel is generally reduced as much as possible. Joint meetings should generally take place predominantly online.

***GPN example:** “only” 2 face-to-face conferences in 5 years; no flights for workshops (exceptions, if overland travel is not reasonable due to the distances despite the same country, e.g. in India); one network conference, all workshops for doctoral students, ISC/IAC meetings and content exchange meetings (“tea time”) took place online; usually only long-time visits of 3 to 6 months; some GPN partner organisations are explicitly involved in the field of ecology and resilience in the context of the climate crisis.*

6. Redistribution from North to South

In light of the massive global inequality that is historically closely linked to European colonialism, development cooperation should aim to use as much money as possible in and for the global South. This includes personnel costs, which ensure that considerable parts of ODA remain in the North.

***GPN example:** Creation of a GPN position in the global South, located and administered via Rhodes University in South Africa; employment of interpreters from and in the Global South for simultaneous translation during online meetings.*

7. Direct cooperation with civil society in the global South

Civil society in the Global South is a chronically underfunded catalyst for change and often a more reliable partner for positive and grassroots social transformation than state apparatuses (see also BMZ (2023, p.18)).

***GPN example:** The GPN currently includes 18 civil society organisations from the Global South whose work and values the GPN initiators found convincing. Our civil society partners apply for funding for workshops, IT material or, in cooperation with at least one university partner, for research projects. Each civil society organisation is represented in the ISC and therefore has a say in GPN processes and the use of funds.*

8. Simplifying bureaucracy and financial accounting

De facto, a great deal of time is spent on financial accounting, both on the part of the partners and on the part of the administrators, and the work involved harbours a high potential for frustration (including intercultural and interpersonal frustration) because all too often the supporting documents or document formats required from the German donor perspective are not available in this form in the Global South and, in addition, all donors demand different bureaucratic requirements, which increases the workload on the South side enormously. Detailed accounting requirements also contribute to increasing personnel costs and thus the use of funds on the German side. Simplifications would be, for example, the billing of lump sums for transport, accommodation or catering costs. Overall, more trust, less control, especially for smaller amounts.

Another bureaucratic hurdle in cooperation with partners in the Global South is the annuality principle at the accounting level, which is explained by the annual federal budget. Especially when working with countries that are experiencing situations of great instability (e.g. Haiti, Iran) and various global crises (e.g. Covid-19, rising cost of living in many countries), it is not realistic to expect Southern partners to be able to make firm commitments to carry out major activities within a clearly defined period of time. We would therefore strongly recommend that the BMZ and the Federal Foreign Office allow the development policy projects they support to transfer a certain percentage of their annual budgets, e.g. 25 %, to the next year with a clear justification of the hardships faced, and a clear plan regarding how the money will be spent.

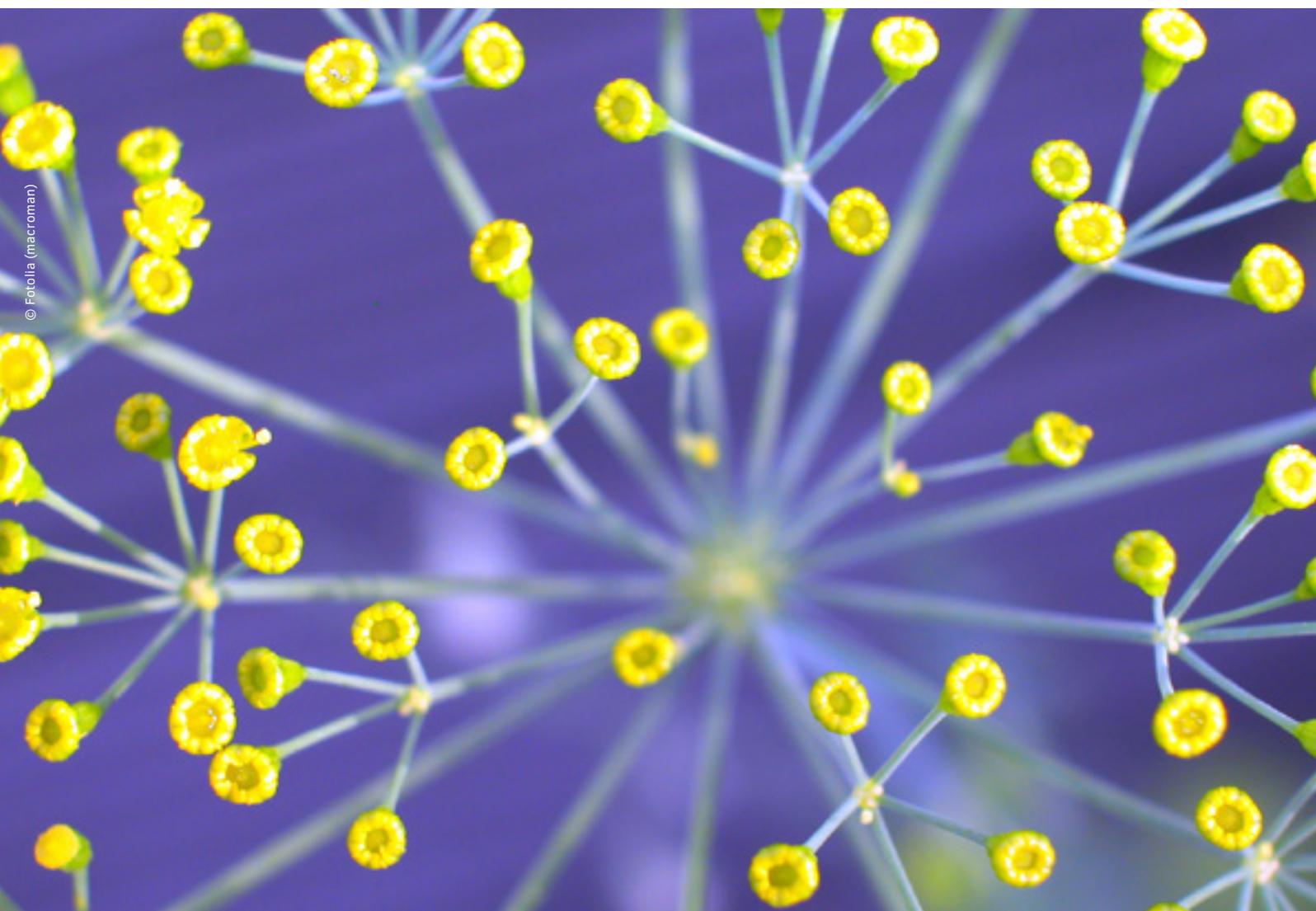
This would mean that less money would have to be paid back to the DAAD in the short term and could instead be spent in the Global South. Additionally, ensuring the timely use of the full amount of transferred project funds within 6 weeks is almost impossible for the Southern partners. For the thrift use of funds it is also not expedient to transfer project funds back and forth between Germany and the Southern partners when a delay becomes evident. The interest charges that may result from delayed spending should therefore not be imposed on Southern partners (and consequently also not have to be absorbed by the German institution).

***GPN example:** While we do our best to assist universities and organisations in the global South to adapt documentation to funding requirements, it is not possible for us in the GPN administration to be accommodating when it comes to financial settlements, as we are bound by the settlement rules for DAAD Exceed projects. In the Exceed programme, we have found open ears on this point, were able to make experience-based suggestions for simplifications and were also able to draw on partner experience, for example, from PhD scholarship holders who were able to compare German funding regulations and bureaucracy with easier-to-administer funding from other EU countries. We hope for further internal DAAD change processes. With regard to interest payments to the DAAD, this has so far been absorbed from the infrastructure funds of the University of Kassel for the project in order to avoid Southern partners in unstable and precarious circumstances having to pay for it.*

9. Support for marginalised groups

People who are exposed to one or more forms of discrimination often find it more difficult to access funding, even though they often need it all the more. Discriminations need to be taken into account in the form of affirmative action considerations and mechanisms.

GPN example: *Scholarships and visiting scholarships went exclusively to people from the Global South. In addition, partner universities themselves decide (with the involvement of the ISC) whether they want to give preference to marginalised scholarship candidates with equal aptitude through affirmative action with regard to gender, sexuality, caste, class or origin. However, more male than female or diverse candidates were supported, which was partly due to the applicant situation. For the future, we are considering better advertising and communication for more and therefore more diverse applications. There also needs to be a discussion about mechanisms to compensate for disadvantages, such as a quota or affirmative action, as well as targeted support for women, as the drop-out rate for female scholarship holders was significantly higher. The framework conditions for family friendliness are also in need of improvement.*



10. Inclusive communication

In order to reduce power asymmetries, it is essential that everyone involved has equal access to information relating to the network, including the budget, in a language they understand. In addition, exchange and sensitisation, especially among the Northern partners, help to do justice to intercultural differences in communication.

GPN example: Various information relating to the network is made available on a shared cloud. The GPN consists of francophone and anglophone partners, which requires a comprehensive concept of bilingualism (AI assisted translation for written communication, simultaneous translation for oral communication in presence/online). Bilingualism also enables regional South-South cooperation that would otherwise not have been possible, e.g. a close cooperation between organisations in Jamaica and Haiti, in which the translation, which was central to the cooperation, was made financially possible by the network. Intercultural, power-sensitive communication remains a challenge, particularly in the context of communicating deadlines and accounting regulations.

11. Addressing power asymmetries in global partnerships

Making progress in the process of decolonising development cooperation requires theoretical and practical discussions and learning in the interwoven areas of decolonisation and power asymmetries in global partnerships – as well as appropriate financial and institutional support.

GPN example: The three GPN research clusters **1) Partnership in development cooperation** (access, accountability and deep participation), **2) Partnership in the global economy** (agriculture, finance and energy) and **3) Partnership in knowledge production** (Eurocentrism and alternative forms of knowledge) focus on power asymmetries in these areas and are a central point of reference for [collaborative research projects](#) (University of Kassel, n.d.–c) and [e-learning formats](#) such as open educational resources (OERs), which address topics such as critical perspectives on development policy, the SDGs and neocolonialism (University of Kassel, n.d.–d). The high number of hits on YouTube shows the strong interest in a scientifically accurate but accessible and visually innovative realisation of this content. To a lesser extent, this also applies to [GPN workshops](#), (University of Kassel, n.d.–e) where experience has shown that the partners have quite a lot of leeway in terms of content according to the priorities of their organisation. However, emphasis is placed on promoting cooperation rather than competition, grassroots processes, sustainability and local knowledge (see [Good practice for funding in the GPN](#) University of Kassel, n.d.–b)).

12. Reflexivity, evaluation and self-criticism

There is a need to create spaces for different groups to jointly reflect on the processes and power asymmetries in their own partnership – on the one hand as donor organisations and recipient organisations, and on the other hand together. External evaluations focussing on this topic by independent persons (i. e. not linked to the donor), which take place with the strong involvement of the South partners, can help to create such spaces and tackle corresponding changes. Admitting mistakes or failures can be seen as very productive, as it creates the feeling of a joint project that requires everyone’s help to improve. It is crucial that working time is set aside to deal with these issues; they cannot be dealt with appropriately “on top” or on a voluntary basis alone. Further training on the topic is needed to enable the Northern partners in particular to critically reflect on the historical and current context of North-South asymmetries. Possible diasporic references to formerly colonised areas and/or positions of employees who have experienced racism must be taken into account separately when designing the courses.

***GPN example:** further training for staff on reflexive partnership work in the context of colonial continuities; external evaluation on power asymmetries in the GPN network; network workshop on North-South asymmetries in the GPN; monitoring of the structural change processes initiated by the evaluation*

Even if, in an unequal world, “eye level” between donors and recipients remains an unattainable ideal and [financial transfers in the context of development cooperation are far less relevant for combating global inequality and poverty than global economic structures characterised by unequal exchange](#) (Faye & Ziai, 2024; Hickel, Hanbury Lemos, & Barbour, 2024), we hope that this policy paper can provide impetus for the transformation towards less asymmetrical partnerships – without distracting from the need to change these structures.

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Global Partnership Network

www.uni-kassel.de/go/GPN

The Global Partnership Network

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This world map displays all countries in which GPN partner institutions are located. The South-Up projection draws attention to overcome Eurocentrism and to take a multitude of perspectives and knowledges into account.

The GPN is funded by the programme "exceed – Higher Education Excellence in Development Cooperation", managed by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) for the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).



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