

Centers of Excellence in development cooperation are being rendered incapable of functioning

(Original in German, translated with DeepL Pro and adjusted by the GPN Team)

The large-scale projects on “Centers of Excellence for Exchange and Development” funded by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) with funds from the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) are facing funding cuts of over 50% of their annual budget from January 2026. We protest against this in this open letter.

Since 2009, the program for “Higher Education Excellence in Development Cooperation” (exceed) has supported the establishment of university networks with the Global South in various thematic areas. The aim is to make research and teaching cooperation between universities more useful for development cooperation and the global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). An evaluation of the program in 2024 attested to its excellent results. At the beginning of this year, the centers that had received funding since 2020 were promised funds for a second five-year phase (2025-29), again amounting to over €30 million.

The centers examine postcolonial asymmetries in global partnerships (Global Partnership Network, University of Kassel), support universities in Africa, Asia, and Latin America in training local health professionals (Center for International Health, LMU Munich), promote the development of social work in Central Asia and China (SOLID, Nuremberg Technical University), and improve graduates’ chances on the domestic and international job market (ACCESS – African Centre for Career Enhancement and Skills Support, University of Leipzig).

They train doctoral students in graduate schools, carry out research projects, advise policymakers, and are dedicated to transferring scientific knowledge to society – in the North and in the South. Last but not least, they promote concrete and practical cooperation between the North and South to reduce massive global inequality with the aim of creating a sustainable, more just global society.

Despite the positive evaluation and signed grant agreements, the shock came in mid-December (2025): starting in January, there would be a 53% cut in funding for all centers, with drastic cuts also planned for the coming years. And by January 7, a new, finalized financial plan for the years 2026-29, agreed upon with university administrations, was to be submitted.

The spokespersons for the centers agree that these funding cuts make their work almost impossible. The remaining budget is barely enough to cover personnel and scholarships. All research projects, workshops, visiting professorships, and conferences are simply no longer financially viable. Although the centers continue to exist nominally, these cuts have effectively paralyzed them and rendered them largely incapable of functioning. Funding commitments to southern partners for this year have had to be withdrawn—they certainly imagined a reliable partnership to be something different. This casts a disastrous light on German development cooperation and its status in federal politics.

In a multipolar world in which we are increasingly dependent on cooperation with the Global South, and given the unfortunate history of five centuries of European colonialism, we consider these funding cuts to be a disastrous signal and a step in the wrong direction—a direction in which the US has already forged ahead with the winding up of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). It is a path of returning to national interests and rejecting multilateral solutions to global problems, and in particular cooperation with universities in the Global South.

We call on the BMZ to reconsider its decision and to reverse the funding cuts for the Exceed program as far as possible.

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Examples from the work of the Exceed Centers:

Since funding began in 2009, CIHLMU Munich has trained more than 130 doctoral students from 37 low- and middle-income countries as part of its PhD program in International Health, in addition to a large number of master's students and continuing education participants in the health sector. The graduates now occupy key roles in local health systems and have themselves become lecturers and supervisors for the next generation of doctoral students. In addition, a number of graduates have created their own local training modules, so that increasingly, training is taking place entirely locally. This creates local expertise and opportunities, and thus represents a successful measure to combat the causes of migration.

The SOLID project promotes social work as a professional field and area of research in China and Central Asia. The focus is on social work with vulnerable population groups, such as drug users and people with HIV. The SOLID doctoral program supports doctoral and postdoctoral students who are active in research and teaching. By expanding social work training at partner institutions, the partner countries acquire practical expertise in drug policy, a key area of development cooperation in Central Asia and China.

The ACCESS network of the University of Leipzig, with 35 partner institutions in Tunisia, Ghana, Benin, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Rwanda, has established itself since 2020 as an important initiative in international education and development cooperation. A total of 5,820 people have benefited from targeted training measures, supplemented by five successfully completed research projects on the further development of the programs. As part of AGEA activities, ACCESS also supports start-up initiatives, thereby creating sustainable prospects for young people in their home countries. The high level of recognition for the project was also evident during the German President's trip to Ghana in November 2025, when the coordinator was awarded the Federal Cross of Merit.

The GPN works with twelve universities and 18 civil society partner organizations in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean, seeking to break down hierarchies within the network between donors and partners. In terms of content, the GPN examines power asymmetries in global partnerships, e.g., in energy agreements, fair trade, debt regimes, the recruitment of nursing staff in the Global South, but also in knowledge production, where indigenous and local knowledge is either not taken seriously or appropriated in an exploitative manner. Funding was also provided for projects on alternatives, e.g., agroecology, solidarity-based economies, or eco-villages in the Sahel region.