

DOES *WELT WÄRTS* WORK? HOW VOLUNTEERS CHANGE, AND HOW THEY CONTRIBUTE TO GLOBAL LEARNING IN GERMANY

Summary

Thinking of “development” in a global way is of ever-growing importance: on the one hand, development issues are increasingly being discussed in German society; on the other, the global community has set out universal goals for sustainable development. Consequently, the significance of development education work is growing. This is where the *weltwärts* development volunteer service has a special role to play: firstly, by facilitating a period of volunteer service supported by an education programme in a partner country of German development cooperation, it aims to empower young adults to act with global solidarity and responsibility. Secondly, returnees are meant to pass on what they have learned and experienced and thus contribute to development education work in Germany. The German Institute for Development Evaluation evaluated the *weltwärts* North-South component from January 2016 to December 2017.

How volunteers change:

- In keeping with the objectives of *weltwärts*, volunteers gain in knowledge about their host country, acquire language skills, and have more positive attitudes towards people from their host country after their period of service abroad. They further improve on their ability to adopt these people’s perspective, and gain in empathy towards them.
- These changes are found in all volunteers, irrespective of their socio-demographic backgrounds.
- Volunteers’ attitudes and competences in relation to persons from other countries in general do not change, however. Attitudes towards diversity in German society also remain unchanged.

How volunteers make a difference in Germany:

- Even before they depart on assignment, *weltwärts* volunteers have above-average levels of civic engagement compared to

the demographic average. After their return, however, they orientate their engagement more markedly towards development issues.

- Volunteers transmit their knowledge and their changed attitudes and competences vis-à-vis people from the host country to other people in their social circles.

Based on the observed outcomes and the developmental relevance of the volunteer service, the evaluation recommends that the programme be continued. The state actors, working jointly with the civil society sending organisations, their partner organisations and with the volunteers’ advocacy groups, should:

- steer *weltwärts* collectively on the basis of a Programme Theory that is supported by them all and realistically achievable;
- enhance the design of the post-assignment phase, which has not been particularly structured or binding until now, to achieve its development education aims even more effectively;
- steadfastly persevere with the efforts already being made to increase the diversity of participants; and
- regularly review the outcomes of the programme and improve it continuously based on the findings.

weltwärts as a development education programme

Key themes of development policy are gaining in significance as a result of current discussions in society – such as the debates about migration and refugees. It is anchored in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted in 2015, that development policy must increasingly concentrate on solving global problems and strengthening engagement in support of “One World” (UN, 2015). This Agenda represents a paradigm shift: whereas the focus used to be on the “development” of so-called developing countries, in Agenda 2030 development is understood as a global challenge. The Sustainable Development Goals formulated in this

document apply to all countries equally. This same approach is found in current German development agendas (BMZ, 2015).

To foster engagement in support of “One World”, Germany is increasingly counting on development education work. This falls within the remit of the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ, 2008). *weltwärts* operates in the context of various programmes for development education work and has a dual link with the educational concept of “Global Learning”¹: it envisages that volunteers will, firstly, develop as individuals during their volunteer service in line with the Global Learning concept and, secondly, contribute to development education work in Germany after their return.

Accordingly, the programme pursues two key objectives:

- (1) volunteers reflect on their attitudes and behaviours and are thus empowered and encouraged to act with global solidarity and responsibility;
- (2) by passing on their experiences, they contribute to building more awareness of development issues in Germany.

The *weltwärts* volunteer service

With a total volume of over 40 million euros and more than 30,000 North-South assignments since its launch in 2007, *weltwärts* is the largest international youth volunteer service in Germany and one of the largest development volunteer services for young adults worldwide. It is financed jointly by the BMZ (75 %) and civil society (25 %), and implemented by over 150 sending organisations and their partner organisations. As a *Gemeinschaftswerk* (a collective venture, in this case between the state and civil society), *weltwärts* is steered jointly by the BMZ, Engagement Global and advocacy groups representing the sending organisations and volunteers. Under the North-South component volunteers from Germany complete a period of service lasting an average of one year in a partner country of German development cooperation.

What volunteers learn and how they pass on their experiences

In keeping with the concept of Global Learning, *weltwärts* aims to initiate changes in the volunteers on the dimensions of knowledge,

competences, attitudes, personality and behaviour. Making use of a quasi-experimental evaluation design in which departing and newly returned volunteers were compared with a comparison group, the evaluation found evidence of changes in the volunteers in some key aspects: volunteers increase their ability to view situations from the perspective of people from the host country and gain empathy and positive attitudes towards them. They also acquire knowledge about their host country and learn its lingua franca (see Figure).

Furthermore, although the extent of the volunteers' civic engagement remains the same, its emphasis changes: in returnees it more frequently has a link to development issues. The majority of returnees are also active in development education work – for instance, in co-planning and facilitating seminars for new volunteers or other information and education events. Knowledge, competences and attitudes as well as civic engagement linked to development issues remain unchanged as the time-interval since their participation in *weltwärts* progressively lengthens.

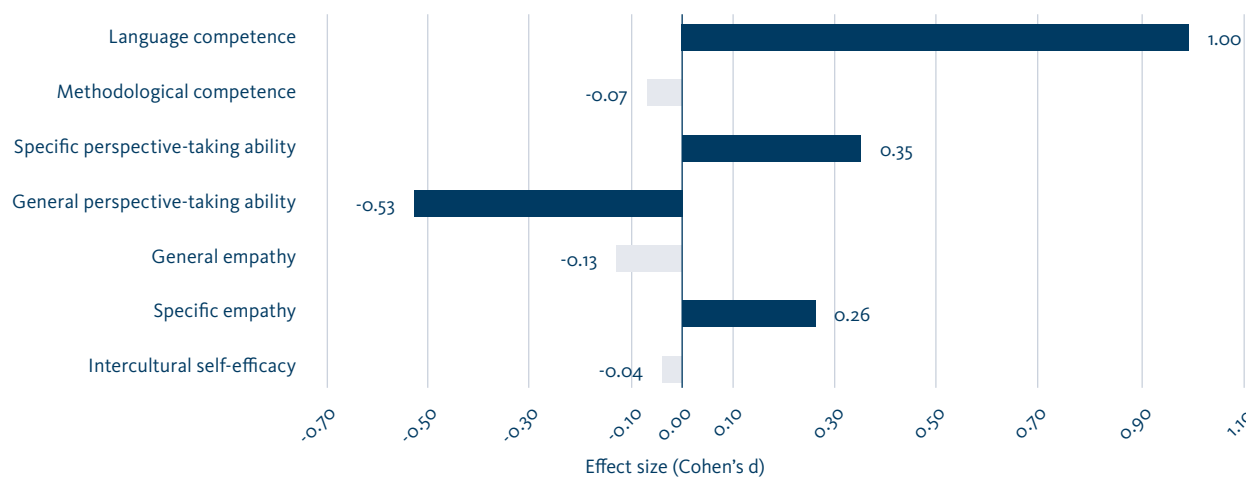
The evaluation shows for the first time: volunteers pass on some aspects of the learning they have experienced to people in their social circles. Parents as well as friends acquire more knowledge about the given volunteer's host country. Friends also increase their empathy, and parents, their positive attitudes, towards people from the host country.

Nevertheless, no change is found in volunteers' attitudes towards a multicultural German society. Moreover, when knowledge, attitudes and competences are considered in relation to other countries, people or cultures more generally, no changes or none of the envisaged changes are found (see Figure). Reasons for this finding could be that volunteers develop an awareness of the limited nature of their own experience and a disapproving attitude towards generalisations. Another possibility, however, is that a transfer of specific experiences to other contexts is an over-ambitious objective, or at least one that is difficult to measure.

All the same, the volunteers' specific learning experiences, their persistence, the transmission to their social circles that takes place and the growing development emphasis of their civic engagement are the expression of the post-assignment phase's high potential with regard to development education work. That said, there is a comparatively low level of structuring to reflect this potential in practice. By continuing to develop the

¹ This is aimed at building competences for sustainable action and problem-solving as well as “respect for other cultures, ways of life and world-views” (VENRO, 2000, p. 13).

Changes in volunteers' competences



Source: Polak et al. (2017)

Note: dark bars show substantial effects ($p < .05$ and Cohen's $d \geq .20$), light bars show non-substantial effects.

programme in a targeted way, this potential can be even better exploited.

To this end, the evaluation formulates the following recommendations:

- The **post-assignment phase should be conceptually extended** by developing systematic and programme-wide offers for returnees and making participation more binding.
- The actors involved in the “*Gemeinschaftswerk*” should jointly produce a fully elaborated **Programme Theory that is supported by them all** and collectively steer *weltwärts* on this basis. The formulated objectives should not be oriented exclusively to what is normatively desirable, but should be realistically achievable on the basis of empirical findings.
- In addition to the steering and implementation processes, the outcomes of *weltwärts* should also be reviewed regularly by means of a collectively supported **outcome-oriented monitoring and evaluation system**.

Learning for all – learning for the few

The aim that “no one will be left behind” is a key principle of Agenda 2030. Human rights obligations likewise require development policy programmes to be accessible to everyone. In no small part, *weltwärts* is aimed at strengthening development education throughout the whole of German society. It should therefore be open to all young adults who belong to the target group.

The evaluation results show that the effectiveness of *weltwärts* does not depend on the volunteers' socio-demographic backgrounds. The changes in volunteers are found to show up equally, whether or not they have a so-called migrant background and whether or not they have passed the *Abitur* (university-track school-leaving certificate). This means that *weltwärts* creates an opportunity to activate a diverse target group in support of development issues. In addition, the German Survey on Volunteering shows that a period of volunteer service can be the first step in civic engagement for people with no prior experience of it (Simonson et al., 2017).

But the fact remains: not all population groups participate in *weltwärts* in equal measure. With disproportionate frequency, the 2016 volunteers were young people under the age of 19, from federal states in western Germany, from privileged, well-educated and predominantly Christian backgrounds, who were more open, more willing to take risks, more left-leaning politically and more interested in development issues; compared with the demographic average for their age-group, they were also more frequently women. Particularly in respect of educational qualifications, age and religious affiliation, these biases are substantial.

The evaluation recommends that efforts to improve diversity be carried forward and intensified:

- Even more resolute efforts should be made to eliminate information deficits and barriers to participation, especially those inherent in the programme's structures and procedures

(e.g. the design and requirements of the application process, the education programme geared in parts towards people with high educational attainment, and programme time-lines where these are primarily aligned to the requirements of the university year).

weltwärts – one volunteer service and many

Cooperation between the state and civil society in the *weltwärts* “Gemeinschaftswerk” imposes high demands on all the actors involved. *weltwärts* is both one service and a multiplicity of services: because it is implemented by over 150 sending organisations and their partner organisations, variations in its specific form can arise. To some extent these reflect the historical

origins of the different sending organisations and the focuses of their work. At the same time, the BMZ bears the overall political responsibility and finances approx. 75 % of *weltwärts*. The formulation of common programme objectives, guidelines and standards and collective steering, evaluation and public relations work therefore place high demands on the resources of all parties involved and their ability to compromise.

It is also clear that the recommendations for the continuing development of the programme place a further load on the system as a whole. They are, however, born of the conviction that *weltwärts* has proven its worth as a learning, self-critical programme and can continue as such, with a view to initiating positive changes even more effectively in future.

Literature

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The German Institute for Development Evaluation (DEval) is mandated by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) to independently analyse and assess German development interventions. Evaluation reports contribute to the transparency of development results and provide policy-makers with evidence and lessons learned, based on which they can shape and improve their development policies.