

Interview:

# Development service is at least as important to Germany as it is to the rest of the world

Erhard Eppler was a member of the Bundestag for the Social Democrats from 1961 to 1976. From 1968 to 1974 he was the Federal Minister for Economic Cooperation. In an interview conducted by AGdD's managing director, Gabi Waibel, he talks about the background to the passing of the Development Workers Act, the development policy issues which were discussed at the time, and why the Act was so important to him.

**The United Nations Development Decade began in 1960. And in 1961 the BMZ (Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation) was founded in Germany. You were one of the first ministers, Mr Eppler. Can you tell us briefly what your understanding was of your task in relation to development policy, and what you did to carry it out?**

could be sure that they would be able to meet their basic needs. I think of food, clothing, education, and shelter as basic needs. Energy was an important issue for me too, so I saw access to electricity as a basic need.

This meant that my understanding – as Minister for Economic Cooperation – of my duties and tasks in relation to development policy, was totally different from the conventional view at the time.

**The Development Workers Act was passed during your term of office. The initial impetus came from the "Development Workers' Discussion Group". And the development service agencies in the AKLHÜ (Association "Learning and Helping Overseas") were intensively involved in drafting the Act. Were there any major debates in the Bundestag at that time? And what were the goals of the Act?**

There was a debate about the Development Workers Act, but not a very big one. Only the experts on the subject from each of the various parties put their names down to speak and then spoke during the debate. To be honest, it was a bit of a side issue for the Bundestag at the time.

The debate about the Act was concerned, on the one hand, with the status of development workers. You can't compare the volunteers, whom the DED (German Development Service) was sending out, for example, with the so-called experts, who went abroad for the KfW

banking group, for example – especially where financial remuneration was concerned. Volunteers were given what was basically a generous amount of pocket money, whereas the experts, who had to be head-hunted and recruited through the German job market, were very well paid. So the development workers had a very different status from that of the experts. And there was an urgent need for their social and financial security to be regulated.



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Gabi Waibel in conversation with Erhard Eppler

In the 1960s very few concrete guidelines or tasks had been laid down, where development policy was concerned. The international discourse was dominated by the aim of increasing GNP (gross national product) in developing countries – i.e. generating economic growth in those countries.

But that was not my main concern. My goal at that time was to help people in developing countries, so that they

And then the Development Workers Act also included paragraph 22, which increased the importance of development service, as a subject of public debate, quite considerably. Paragraph 22 was about exempting people who performed development service from having to do military service. So development service thereby gained equal status with military service. And this was an important factor which served to make it more attractive. That was very important to me at the time.

**When the Act came to be implemented, what was your experience of that?**

There weren't really any difficulties worth mentioning, where the implementation or application of the Act was concerned.

Most of the problems which confronted us in connection with development service during those early years could be traced back to a different cause altogether. A lot of young people went abroad because they were motivated by ethical considerations or a commitment to development. They weren't interested in earning a lot of money. They wanted to give service and help people in the places they went to. If they got the impression that they were being expected to support projects which were not in keeping with their ideals or political aims, they sometimes got involved in the local politics. And that could then lead to political conflict with the host country. These were the problems which we were more concerned with.

**Can you tell us something about the funding of development service? Was it easy or more of a challenge to ensure that sufficient funds were allocated in the budget?**

Well, if you look at it in proportion to the total budget of the BMZ, the spending on development service never amounted to very much. If you simply consider how many thousands of marks a highly qualified expert earned in a month, for example, and compare this with the cost of a development service volunteer, then you can see that this was not a financially significant item of expenditure.

**In 2017, the then German president, Joachim Gauck, said in a speech to returned development workers: "When I look at you, I see in front of me the wonderful, beautiful, supportive country, which is Germany today." It was a very affirming speech and a warm appreciation of service overseas. What would you say? What political and social significance does active solidarity have today?**

I can only underline what Mr Gauck said. I often met with development workers both during and after my tenure as minister. And I've attended a lot of events with people who have performed development service. I have always been struck by the pleasant atmosphere of these meetings and the unusual readiness of everyone to talk freely and openly.

The people who had been "abroad" learned, above all, that the quality of life which we enjoy in Germany is not a matter of course, and there are billions of people who have to struggle through life in incredibly primitive circumstances – sometimes in the face of difficulties which we can barely imagine. Such "learning experiences" make a big impression.

These people come back from their development service with a great sense of responsibility and are especially sensitive to the needs of others. These are very valuable qualities, especially nowadays.

**The Development Workers Act is still the BMZ's only piece of legislation. Does this mean that it is especially important to German development policy as a whole? And why hasn't the BMZ introduced any other legislation?**

Well, most of the tasks which the BMZ has to perform can be completed without additional legislation. The Development Workers Act was important and necessary, in particular because it meant that development service was recognised as an alternative to military service. And military service belongs to one of the core tasks of the state, so this raised the status of development service so that it was on a par, so to speak, with military service in the eyes of both state and society. That could only be achieved through legislation. And that was a crucial reason why the Development Workers Act was so important to me.

**We are celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Development Workers Act this year. Looking back, would you say that the Act has proved its worth? And do you have a political or perhaps a personal message on the occasion of this anniversary?**

Yes, the Development Workers Act has proved its worth. It created the framework within which development service could be discussed and developed further. And I can only emphasise once again that development service is at least as important to Germany as it is to the rest of the world. They are great people, the people who are returning from development service – just as former president Joachim Gauck said. They have learned and understood things. And they look at the world – and their own country too – through different eyes. And they are people who know what solidarity means. So, in this way, these development workers have helped our German society just as much – if not more than – the societies of the Global South.

**Thank you very much for talking to us, Mr Eppler.**

Interview:  
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