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Understanding Governance as a Key Driver of Food Systems Transformation

Lessons from Germany's "One World – No Hunger" (SEWOH) initiative



1 Background

Gerd Müller:

»We are setting new priorities through a Special Initiative for a World without Hunger. Hunger in the world is surely the greatest scandal of all [...]. Twenty-five thousand children die every day. This is scandalous because it doesn't have to be this way. This world, this planet, can feed ten billion people. And we must play our part in making this possible. That is why together with the other parliamentary parties, I have launched a Special Initiative for a World without Hunger. We will transfer our knowledge, our know-how, and our technological capabilities and build ten green innovation centres in various African countries in order to strengthen the entire agricultural value chain from farm to fork. Through these flagship projects, we will show how sustainable agriculture can be developed in Africa.«

Speech to the Bundestag on 21 March 2014 mentioning SEWOH for the first time

Dr. Gerd Müller, is the former Federal Minister for Economic Cooperation and Development (2013–2021)

Food security and agricultural development had been largely absent from the agendas of international development donors since the early 1990s¹ when Germany's Minister for Economic Cooperation and Development, Dr. Gerd Müller, launched a special initiative entitled "ONE WORLD – No Hunger" (in German *Sonderinitiative EINEWELT ohne Hunger* – SEWOH) in 2014. The stated aim of SEWOH was to fight hunger and malnutrition mainly through the application of innovation and technology. With a substantial budget of EUR 1.5 billion per year, SEWOH was designed to support fast and flexible measures, managed rather independently of the Ministry's usual administrative structures. These measures mainly took the form of projects and programmes to improve food security in partner countries. By 2019, SEWOH encompassed over 300 projects in 28 countries, mostly in Africa and Asia.

¹ Brüntrup, M. (2019): Agricultural and food topics merit key role. The Current Column, German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE). Online: <https://www.idos-research.de/en/the-current-column/article/agricultural-and-food-topics-merit-key-role/>

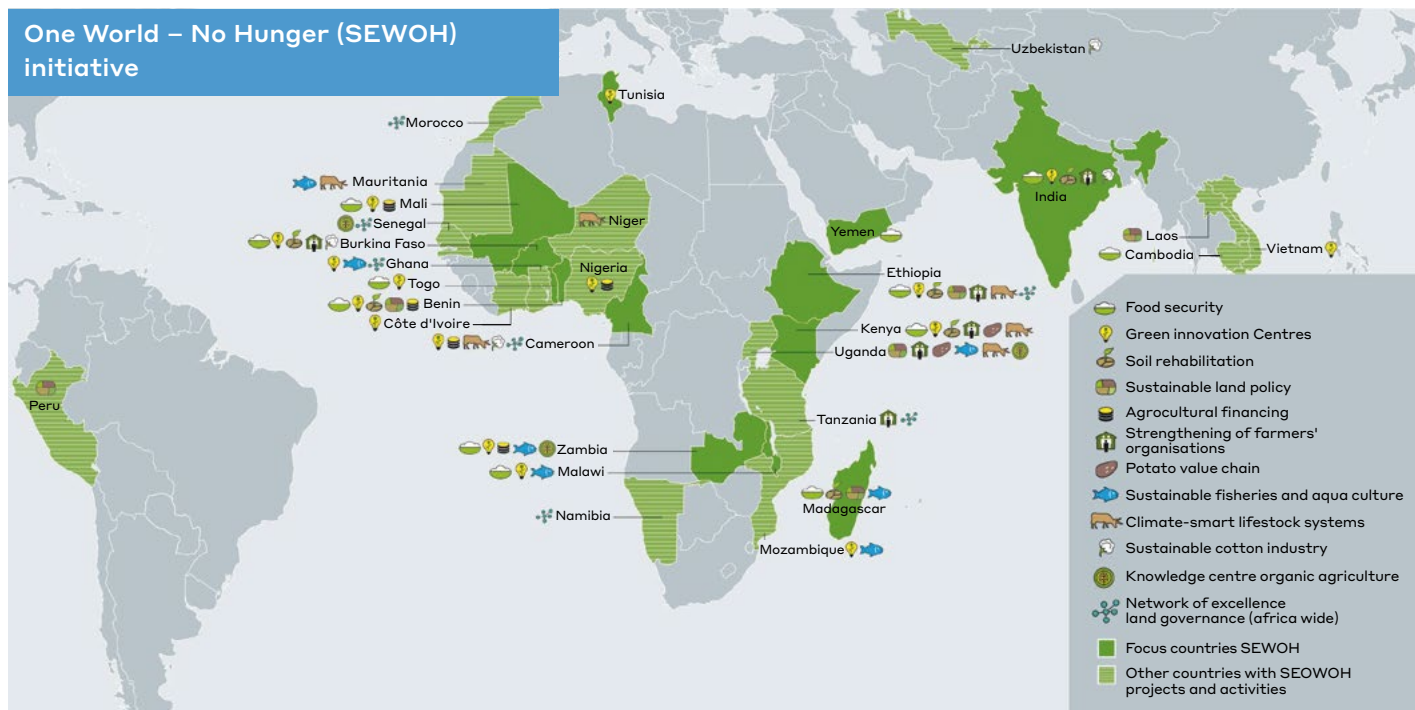


Figure 1: “One World - no Hunger initiative”, October 2019 © BMZ

Leonard Mizzi:

»SEWOH was, first, probably one of the best flagships in terms of German leadership at the global level. Second, [it was] a strong commitment to agriculture and food security, and third a good example of coherence and coordination with the European Union and Commission at global, regional and country levels on putting agrifood systems transformation at the top of the political agenda.«

Dr. Leonard Mizzi is Head of Unit at the European Commission Directorate-General for International Partnerships – Sustainable Agri-Food Systems and Fisheries

The Strategic Advisory Board: Political backbone of SEWOH

The key to securing long-term funding for SEWOH was strong domestic political support. The broad stakeholder alliance behind SEWOH was represented by a high-ranking Strategic Advisory Board (SAB), which was tasked with advising the German Ministry (BMZ) on the strategic and content-related progress of the initiative. During the second term of the initiative (since 2018), the SAB increasingly focused on the inadequate governance of

the SEWOH. BMZ thus specifically enabled TMG to analyse the governance of SEWOH. TMGs analysis focused on the steering of SEWOH, not on the impact of projects and programs. For the respective study, TMG conducted 18 expert interviews to assess how SEWOH was implemented domestically, globally and in partner countries². The majority of interviewees were members of the SAB. Selected extracts from these interviews are presented here.

² Schindler, J. & Hoffmann, H. (2023). Zur Governance der Transformation von Agrar- und Ernährungssystemen – Eine politische Analyse der Sonderinitiative »EINEWELT ohne Hunger«. TMG Bericht. doi: 10.35435/1.2024.1.

2 Insights from SEWOH

Stefan Schmitz:

»Politically, the goal was to achieve the fastest possible change and development of agriculture in selected countries through the promotion of innovation. This was clearly the political goal. Innovation was central, coupled with the conviction that the transfer of innovation and technology from the North to the South is a central tool of development policy. The political motto of the initiative was: 'A world without hunger is possible. We have the means and the knowledge'.«

Dr. Stefan Schmitz is the former Commissioner for SEWOH at the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)

Following this political guidance, within a year, SEWOH has launched five so-called "Green Innovation Centres (GIC). But such speedy implementation came at a price: the initiative faced challenges in developing a comprehensive strategy for eradicating hunger. Consequently, a high-level SEWOH Strategic Advisory Board, which was founded as multi-stakeholder platform and supported the Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) in all activities related to SEWOH and its successor initiative, raised concerns about the lack of an overarching concept and thus a gap in governance.

Following the United Nations Food Systems Summit (UN FSS) in 2021 and the development of national pathways for food systems transformation, SEWOH faced the task of aligning its programmes and projects with political strategies that support the development of these pathways in partner countries.

After the change of government in Germany in 2021 and inspired by the results of the UN FSS, SEWOH was restructured as the "Special Initiative for the Transformation of Agricultural and Food Systems" (SI AGER), with a focus on multilateral initiatives such as G20, G7 and the Global Alliance on Food Security (BMZ, 2023c).

The TMG study demonstrates the potential for further strengthening a strategic, partner-focused approach and overall governance. While mobilization of domestic political support, a reinforcement of global initiatives like G7 and G20, and further development of technical innovations were achieved, expanding these areas could have yielded even greater results.

2.1 A solid foundation through strong domestic support

Gerd Müller:

»I am the son of a small farmer, and I've experienced firsthand how even small-scale farming can be successful in Germany. Large-scale farming is not necessarily the answer, especially in Africa.«

Interview with Dr. Gerd Müller on the 23 July 2014 in the magazine "Welt-Sichten"

SEWOH was driven by the very strong personal commitment and leadership of German Minister Dr. Gerd Müller, who felt a strong personal link to the main SEWOH target group.

His vision was to fight hunger through innovation. To realise this, Dr. Müller made available a flexible, non-earmarked budget line of EUR 500 million per year, which was added to the existing annual BMZ budget of EUR 1 billion earmarked for nutrition and agriculture. This initiative established Germany's position as the second-largest donor in this field worldwide.

In Germany, BMZ had strong domestic support for prioritizing the fight against hunger, grounded in a convincing and non-controversial narrative. A broad range of stakeholders was invited by the Ministry to form a strategic advisory board, which still meets regularly. The Ministry successfully involved organisations from outside the field of development cooperation in the initiative. These additional actors include the German Farmers' Association (DBV), fertilizer and agro-chemical producers such as BASF, and manufacturers of agricultural machinery. The establishment of this structure, which unites a wide range of stakeholders in a constructive dialogue, can be considered a success in itself.

Michael Windfuhr:

»I believe that our staff, including the consulting experts on SEWOH's Strategic Advisory Board, have contributed significant ideas that have helped shape these processes [G7 & G20]. These include questions like: "What do we hope to achieve now in Elmau or in the G7 context, where can we set priorities?" From my perspective, this is undisputed.«

Michael Windfuhr is the Deputy Director of the German Institute for Human Rights

2.2 Global agenda-setting, but limited political impact

Leonard Mizzi:

»It [SEWOH] influenced our policy because it was, I would say, a precursor of a 'Team Europe' approach. I would say it was an embryonic way where you have a leadership from a one-member state to join forces on an issue like agri-food systems. One must recall, the topic of agri-food systems was on the top of the agenda at L'Aquila about 12 to 15 years ago [35th G8 summit held in L'Aquila, Italy, in 2009]. Since then, agri-food has been less present. So, this initiative helped us also stimulate back a bit of prioritization of agri-food at the European context.«

However, political leadership at global level requires more than just funding. The personal engagement of Minister Müller and his State Secretary in global processes, though present, could have been more prominent, mirroring the high political commitment he showed domestically.

However, the international community did not honour Germany's pioneering role by establishing other robustly financed initiatives elsewhere. SEWOH was perceived as a German initiative, which, along with varying national budget situations of the G7 members, contributed to the absence of major financial commitments from other donors.

SEWOH succeeded in bringing the conversation about hunger, malnutrition, and rural development back to the global stage, particularly during Germany's G7 presidencies in 2015 and 2022. At EU level it was even described as precursor of "Team Europe" approach.

Germany's high level of investments in global initiatives – the 2015 G7-Elmau commitment to lift 500 million people out of hunger and the 2017 G20 initiative for rural youth employment – was supported by a broad alliance of German stakeholders.

Stefan Schmitz:

»The special initiative has attracted considerable international attention among donors. The financial resources provided by Germany have made us a leading donor in this area, and as a result, we have earned respect and admiration. During this time, Germany's voice carried weight among donors. This was clearly demonstrated by the G7 decisions at Elmau in 2015.«

2.3 Many projects, few strategies

SEWOH's strength lay in its flexibility and openness. Projects could be quickly designed, approved, financed, and implemented based on decisions made within the Ministry, allowing for rapid investment and easily traceable results.

This thematic openness was crucial for engaging a broad range of stakeholders and driving innovative approaches, such as in agricultural value chains, soil restoration, and farmer organisations.

However, this approach came at the cost of a clear long-term vision for Germany's global fight against hunger. As a result, SEWOH can be seen more as a collection of individual decisions than a cohesive governance strategy.

Michael Windfuhr:

»As things turned out, we did do something in many areas, but at some point during the project implementation, we realized that an additional or accompanying political dialogue would have been important to initiate structural changes with specific examples. However, in development policy, it is always difficult to talk about structural issues, simply because the individual projects are so appealing. But, of course, this is ultimately the essential lever for achieving sustainable impact. Unfortunately, we have made hardly any progress in this regard.«

2.4 Understanding of innovation

In SEWOH, innovation was mostly understood in technical terms. Thanks to a focus on project implementation, technical innovation such as improved value chains and post-harvest technologies were promoted through so-called *Green Innovation Centres* and other projects. Yet, there was a lack of focus on social innovation for addressing governance issues, including institution building.

Social innovation plays an important role in transformation processes (Stiem-Bhatia et al. 2022). These are solutions rooted in local contexts that tackle common challenges in new ways (Neumeier 2011). Social innovations focus not only on the outcomes but also on the processes by which

these solutions are developed. Depending on the context, they can therefore contribute to addressing governance challenges.

Alexander Müller:

»I see SEWOH as having three key features: It marked a political reset in Germany's approach to global food security; it offered the opportunity to help develop a significant national fund; and it provided a unique platform for exchange. These factors made SEWOH truly innovative.«

Alexander Müller is Managing Director of the Berlin-based think tank TMG Research gGmbH.

2.5 Political dialogue with partner countries was limited

Michael Windfuhr:

»SEWOH was an attempt by the Development Minister to give a topic greater political weight, while simultaneously facing the challenge of rooting something like this sufficiently in time within an existing institution so that it was compatible with the institution's internal processes. And the Minister essentially took a shortcut with the topics that were important to him. He tried to give these topics a certain prominence as well as funding – and he was

quite successful in both respects. However, this was associated with an additional setup. And this additional setup basically shaped the 'life' of SEWOH, shaped the anchoring of this initiative in the Ministry. [...]. This is the political background. But at least the Minister gave the topic of 'A World Without Hunger' a prominence that 'hunger relief' had not had in the German parliament for a long time. This, I think, should definitely be noted.«

The new, sectoral budget line of SEWOH, which enabled fast innovative action, was criticised by the regional departments of BMZ for creating a parallel structure. This led to difficulties in coordination between the sectoral and regional departments, who are responsible for bilateral negotiations with partner governments. The Ministry faced the challenge of coordinating sectoral approaches (which offer political opportunities at a global level) with regional approaches (which are necessary to negotiate and implement global initiatives at national or local levels). Consequently, some partners viewed SEWOH projects as additional funds being spent through parallel structures.

Stefan Schmitz:

»I see the greatest deficit [of SEWOH] in the discrepancy between the actual power to shape country-specific bilateral cooperation, which lies with the regional departments, and the conceptual design, which lies with the sectoral departments. It never truly succeeded in bridging this gap. The regional departments simply had too much power. We spent half our time trying to make ourselves heard by the regional department, which constantly hoped that the SEWOH would become mainstream in the country programme as quickly as possible. With this weakness, a separate design claim from a sectoral perspective was not enforceable. Here, two almost irreconcilable views simply collided.«

3 Main conclusions from the SEWOH scoping study

SEWOH was anchored in the German political system, which was key to its establishment and long-term funding. A broad alliance represented by the Strategic Advisory Board (SAB) supported and advised the BMZ on the implementation of SEWOH. This encompassed more than the traditional development cooperation actors. Thanks to SEWOH's extensive resources, innovative bilateral and multilateral approaches could be flexibly financed. The achievement of quick, visible results was prioritized, leading to a focus on projects and programmes, while governance and the strategic integration of partner countries were deprioritized.

In a context of multiple global crises, increasing domestic political scrutiny of development cooperation, and significant budget cuts and reallocations in donor countries, the field of food security and agriculture is increasingly being eclipsed by other policy areas. Support for Food Systems Transformation (FST) is further compromised

by the focus in development cooperation on quantitative targets, which are easier to demonstrably achieve in projects than in political transformation processes.

Processes for negotiating and providing global public goods are considered a strength of development cooperation because they are based on jointly agreed values of the international community yet do not impinge on legitimate self-interests. A key challenge here is to manage the adoption of global processes at national level.

In an increasingly multipolar world with more powerful partners in the Global South, different processes are needed to negotiate a just transition. TMG proposes an "FST Lab" for this purpose. The FST Lab-idea is based on strong voices from the South and the North, balanced interests between the Global South and Germany/EU, and trust-based debates to reveal and analyse mutual interests. Together, instruments can be developed to support more effective management and transformation of agricultural and food systems.

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