Smart implementation of complex change processes

Cooperation management facilitates the recoupling of progress toward sustainable development

The authors:

Christoph Beier

Programm Director "Good Governance for Local Development", South Caucasus, GIZ

Renate Kirsch

Lead Governance Advisor, Governance and Conflict Department, GIZ

The institution:

giz Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH

As a federal enterprise, GIZ has over 50 years of experience in a wide variety of areas, including economic development and employment promotion, energy and the environment, as well as peace and security. GIZ works in demand around the globe – from the German government to European Union institutions, the United Nations, the private sector and governments of other countries.

The main commissioning party is the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development.

A recoupling of social, political, environmental and economic progress requires expertise in managing complex societal transformations, or change projects, on a national level in partner countries, as well as on a regional and global level. The success of recoupling hinges less on identifying new paradigms and designing new policies. It requires primarily smart implementation of good policies.

A focus on smart implementation is crucial for two reasons: First, because the challenge for most countries is less in designing but more in implementing policies. Countries often lack the capacity to translate abstract polices into operational programs and/or to manage the implementation of such programs. This is when sound reform ideas and policies become stuck, derailed, sabotaged or reversed. Second, reform champions often fail to manage controversial stakeholder interests constructively – in a manner that gives the reform process a productive drive and direction. Gaining public support for recoupling ideas entails creating cooperation platforms where different interests can be negotiated fairly and transparently. For this, the spectrum of relevant and legitimate interests must be identified and openly presented, the fair representation of interest groups assured, and mechanisms identified for the efficient and fair bargaining over interests.

GIZ accompanies public, private and non-governmental partners in societies in implementing complex societal change projects. The focus on implementation sets it apart from many other development organizations not directly involved in implementing measures. In a recent learning project, GIZ programs retraced their implementation process and identified 15 principles that enhance the smart implementation of policies and that support successful program implementation with the objective of contributing to societal change for a more sustainable development. In this article, we present a few principles of smart implementation that are particularly relevant for achieving recoupling.

»Gaining public support for recoupling ideals entails creating cooperation platforms.«

IMPLEMENTATION CAN SUPPORT RECOUPLING OF SOCIAL, POLITICAL, ENVIRONMENTAL AND ECONOMIC PROGRESS

The learning project confirmed some knowledge about how change happens, which can be found in GIZ's management model Capacity WORKS[1]. First, complex change occurs neither in a linear fashion nor at an even pace. It can only be steered to a limited extent, which makes it vital to agree on interim goals and requires agile and iterative adaptation in management. Second, promoting cooperation (between several individuals and/or organizations) is an effective way of shaping societal change

processes. GIZ chooses cooperation management as the core principle guiding project implementation. In our work, cooperation has proven to be an important success factor for developing new and publicly accepted solutions to problems. Cooperation brings new constellations of actors together to generate new ideas for solutions.

Solutions to problems are often unknown when GIZ program teams take up work in partner countries; instead, they must be identified and developed. This is done in collaboration with local stakeholders. GIZ's teams can play a helpful role in convening stakeholders who otherwise would or could not meet on their own to deliberate and negotiate ideas and interests. It can be quite resource- and time-intensive to obtain acceptance from all stakeholders to jointly discuss solutions for a common problem. But this is exactly where there is potential to recouple progress and find more comprehensive and sustainable solutions.

International best practices often provide a starting point for local actors and program teams in their search for possible solutions. But each of these ideas must be adapted to fit local conditions. This is often done through experiment. Generic concepts are crafted and modulated until they achieve the required accuracy necessary to fit the local situation. Program teams describe how they often hand-pick actors, strategies, processes and concepts to craft solutions that perfectly match local challenges. For many GIZ program managers, this accurate match defines the quality of service provided to clients and enhances the sustainability of results.

Stakeholder consultations, with particular attention to bringing groups of people together who had not previously interacted, is the instrument of choice to generate possible solutions to problems and promote partnership.

Dennis Snower (2019) mentions two objectives for supporting the recoupling of social, political and economic progress: First, "to create not just commonality of interest, but commonality of purpose"[2], and second, to "create new moral narratives relevant to both our local, regional, national and global problems." The process of fostering cooperation and the instruments described here facilitate exactly this: New stakeholder constellations and initiated cooperation can facilitate joint action that drives the process of recoupling forward.

SMART IMPLEMENTATION REQUIRES FLEXIBILITY FOR CHANGES OF COURSE, THE OPTION OF REALIGNING GOALS AND DECISION-MAKING AT LOCAL LEVEL

In the recent learning project, retracing important decisions during the implementation of a GIZ project revealed the obstacles, imponderables and inconsistencies GIZ teams can face. Programs respond to such challenges or changes by adapting their strategies, activities and cooperation partners, thus deviating from jointly agreed plans. These adjustments happen continually throughout the entire implementation process. They are the norm, not an exception, and yet they remain unpredictable. Responding to imponderables can cost a great deal of time and resources. At the same time, adjustments are necessary to support and advance the partners' change process. Obstacles a governance project in Indonesia experienced illustrate this point: The project advised two ministries on financing mechanisms for climate change mitigation measures. But before addressing this issue, it was necessary to solve the highly politicized topic of discontinuing fuel subsidies, so that decision-makers could work on the actual topic at hand. Next to reacting to challenges, projects also harness dynamics and use opportunities to promote and accelerate change processes. The governance program in Tunisia responded to the dynamics of a new political situation following the "Arab Spring". The new political decision-makers showed interest in considering a decentralisation reform – an idea the GIZ project had championed with the previous government on several occasions. GIZ was able to rapidly support the new political leadership with advice on such a reform.

> **»The room to maneuver is important when the aim is to recouple social, political, environmental and economic agendas.«**

Implementation requires scope for adapting and changing course and for realigning goals to ever-changing local circumstances. This room to maneuver is particularly important when the aim is to recouple social, political, environmental and economic agendas, and this must be understood, backed and facilitated by organisations providing process advice, along with their commissioners. Colm Kelly from PwC, for example, states in his vision brief on recoupling economic dimensions that it will "be critical to nurture agility, adaptability and reskilling in the workplace of the future."[4] The same holds true for any dimension of societal change and recoupling.

JOINT RESPONSIBILITY OF GIZ PROGRAM TEAMS AND PARTNERS FOR PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION SHAPES WHAT IS DONE, HOW IT IS DONE AND WHEN

Sharing responsibility with partners for implementing projects and achieving agreed goals is a key and overarching principle of cooperation in GIZ projects. GIZ thus accepts that local conditions and local capacity shape implementation more than external factors. GIZ's support consists in helping to shape and facilitate the partners' process of desired change. The partners determine the type, direction and speed of change. When designing a program, GIZ compares these ideas with those of the commissioning parties, and it must meet the challenge of negotiating a compromise acceptable to all parties. The extent to which local partners identify with the goals and approaches of the project determines – and in some cases limits – what is done, how it is done and when.

Moreover, ownership fluctuates throughout implementation. Chang-

ing stakeholder constellations (e.g. after elections) or a change in political priorities can alter partners' or commissioners' ownership of agreed goals, approaches or timelines. Smart implementation implies that ownership is constantly reviewed and ensured. It is a precondition for the sustainability of achieved results. A case from Peru illustrates what this means in daily life: The program aimed to reduce and prevent violence against women. The private sector was identified as a societal entity that could assist in changing attitudes and preventing violence against women. The program began by wooing the private sector as a partner in advocating for the cause and taking action to prevent abuse and violence in the workplace and at home. Knowledge of the local context and contacts of the national program staff helped identify options for cooperation. Yet, it took many tries to find the right hook to capture the attention of business and get partners to engage. Research initiated by the program calculated the monetary effects of partner violence for businesses, and this spurred local businesses to engage in awareness-raising and training.

SMART IMPLEMENTATION ACKNOWLEDGES THAT SOCIETAL CHANGE IS POLITICAL IN NATURE

Smart implementation means understanding the political context not as an external or given framework, but to see it as part of the options for action. This has two consequences for program teams. First, the rules of political action not only have to be familiar, project partners and staff must also have mastered them so well that they can act within them. The national program staff members have an indispensable role

to play in this. Second, it entails ongoing monitoring of the political dimensions of the reform process, to assess changes that require the program to respond.

Using a multi-level approach for project design is a way of dealing with implementation risks through political action. A programme design that involves measures at individual, organizational and political levels enables the balancing of bottlenecks, deadlocks or a lack of synchronization during implementation. It allows program teams to maintain contact with the cooperation partners even if the process stalls at one level.

»Successful recoupling requires capacity to implement new policy ideas and to steer change processes.«

SMART IMPLEMENTATION MEANS FOCUSING ON BOTH RESULTS AND PROCESSES

The principle of assuming joint responsibility for implementing projects explains the strong focus on process in GIZ pro-

jects. It ensures that despite all issues that may arise, projects stay attuned to local problems, capacity and solutions. The process itself influences which and how results are achieved. This leads to tension in daily program management because teams must respond to the rationale of the different actors involved (partners, local actors, head office, commissioners). On the one hand, a project seeks to achieve pre-defined objectives and indicators (results orientation) in order to be accountable to commissioners about progress. On the other hand, strategies, processes and activities are continually being adapted to local changes (process orientation) to ensure that support is effective and sustainable. One of the consequences of this parallel focus is that program managers integrate two different rationales into their implementation strategies that are not always compatible and can lead to conflicting objectives. A consequence is that projects must seek a balance between achieving short- to medium-term results within a project cycle, while aiming at long-term societal change that easily takes a decade.

The strong focus on process allows the qualitative aspect of development to be taken into account. Recording progress and change by measuring results is use-

ful, but it says little about the effectiveness of the results. It is only the process – the way in which results are achieved – that gives an idea of their quality and effectiveness. Smart implementation therefore means keeping track of both the results orientation and the process orientation and steering projects using both forms of logic.

In summary, implementation that facilitates a recoupling toward sustainable progress focuses on cooperation. It is characterized by a process- and partner-oriented way of working, in which technical consultancy is combined with policy, process and organizational consultancy. This requires reflective management in collaboration with the partners. Reflective management helps to link previous interactions and experiences to future plans and can thus give transformations direction and drive. Successful recoupling requires capacity to implement new policy ideas and to steer national, regional or global change processes. Such capacity needs to be built for and with all involved stakeholders. Attention to smart implementation and investing in the capacity to implement are aspects that deserve more attention in the debate on how to achieve a recoupling for social, political, environmental and economic progress.

[1] GIZ GmbH Ed. 2015: Cooperation Management for Practitioners. Managing Social Change with Capacity WORKS. Springer Gabler Verlag.

[2] Dennis J. Snower 2019: Toward global paradigm change: Beyond the crisis of the liberal world order; In: Global Solutions Journal, Vol. IV, page 25.

[3] Ebenda, p. 10.

[4] Colm Kelly 2019: Repurposing our economies – and our businesses. In: Global Solutions Journal, Issue 4, p. 27.