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Commentary by the Evaluation Working Group on the evaluation of the IDOS

Drawn up on the basis of the decision of the Evaluation Working Group of March 10th, 2025 on the basis of the JRF evaluation guidelines of October 26th, 2021.

Procedure

The on-site visit of the German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS) by the expert group took place on October 30th and 31st, 2024. The agency AQ Austria was commissioned with the evaluation. The persons in charge provided by AQ were Elisabeth Froschauer-Neuhauser and Christian Rogler.

The members of the expert group were:

- **Univ.-Prof. Dipl.-Ing. Dr. techn. Dr.h.c. mult. Harald Kainz**, Graz University of Technology, Head of the review team
- **Prof. Dr. Petra Dannecker**, University of Vienna (Reviewer from research)
- **Melanie Hauenstein**, UNDP Germany (Reviewer from professional practice)
- **Mathias Mogge**, Welthungerhilfe (Reviewer from professional practice)
- **Prof. Dr. Peter Taylor**, University of Sussex (Reviewer from research)

The evaluation report was sent to the members of the Evaluation Working Group and the institute by email on December 19th, 2024. It contains general information on the evaluation and an introductory summary. The main report is divided into five subsections:

1. General issues
2. Organisational structure
3. Resources, deployment and staff
4. Early researcher and staff development and cooperation
5. Work results and feedback

All sub-items are subdivided into findings and conclusions and in some cases lead to recommendations.

The IDOS has waived the option of writing a statement on the evaluation report in accordance with points III.5 and III.7 of the evaluation guidelines.

According to point III.6 of the JRF evaluation guidelines, the following applies: "The Evaluation Working Group draws up a commentary on the basis of the JRF's 'self-image' with the involvement of other members of the JRF if necessary. Institute directors who

are affected by the evaluation report and who are members of the Evaluation Working Group do not take part in these parts of the meeting. The commentary contains a recommended resolution of the Evaluation Working Group and serves as the basis for the vote in the General Assembly.”

The self-concept of the JRF states (excerpt):

- 1) The non-profit institutes of the Johannes Rau Research Foundation stand for interdisciplinary research in North Rhine-Westphalia. They are orientated towards society and follow the idea of “human scale” orientated research.
- 2) The aim of the Johannes Rau Research Foundation is to disseminate research findings not only in scientific circles, but above all in society, politics and the economy, thereby contributing to sustainable development.
- 3) All institutes have unique selling points and international networks in their fields of research. They are closely linked to at least one university in North Rhine-Westphalia. They are therefore important catalysts for the research landscape in NRW as a whole.

The evaluation report of the expert group was reviewed at the meeting of the Evaluation Working Group on March 10th, 2025 and assessed with regard to the objectives of the JRF. The commentary is preceded below by the “Summary” chapter of the evaluation report.

Summary of the IDOS evaluation report

Extract from the evaluation report¹

On the basis of the written information provided by IDOS and the meetings with representatives of IDOS in the course of the site visit in Bonn the following can be summarised:

Overall assessment

IDOS satisfies its self-defined objectives excellently.

Self-defined objectives and areas of work/research

At the time of the last evaluation 2018 still named *German Development Institute* (Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik/DIE), the institute changed its name to *German Institute of Development and Sustainability* (IDOS) in 2022. The research and the projects conducted at IDOS justify the name change. Policy advice, training and research are the three pillars for all of IDOS' activities, with the institute's research approach and scope being a key element for all of IDOS successful and impactful activities. During the site visit, the reviewers could convince themselves of the interdependence of the three pillars and see that the cross-departmental cooperation at IDOS is highly beneficial.

IDOS can pride itself for its high level of research. Nevertheless, the reviewers have received the impression that IDOS' ambitions to achieve its high aspirations for being an excellent think-tank and at the same time be comparable to an excellent non-university research institute might present challenges for the institute's objectives to do both excellent research and policy advice: IDOS still needs to be accessible for less prestigious research institutions or non-academic organisations to reach its target audiences and achieve impact.

With regard to IDOS' training activities, the reviewers acknowledge both the quality of the trainings offered as well as their relevance for allowing IDOS to pursue its threefold approach, its research to be transformative as well as to expand its international networks.

Organisational structure

With its stakeholders, the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and the Ministry of Culture and Science of the state North Rhine-Westphalia (MKW NRW), IDOS has strong partners who advocate for the institute in the state NRW and in the Federal Republic. This becomes particularly apparent in the funding structure of IDOS.

The reviewers noticed the strong commitment and engagement of both staff and management and also the appreciation and respect of different staff groups for each other. The internal organisational structure allows for cross-departmental cooperation that could, nevertheless, be strengthened even further.

Resources, deployment and staff

The reviewers consider IDOS' current funding situation as rather comfortable and favourable, welcome the continuous rise in IDOS' institutional funding in the evaluation period and would

¹ The part highlighted in grey is the unabridged and unchanged summary from the evaluation report of the expert group.

like to point out that stable funding is an essential prerequisite for building and retaining expertise, and thereby for the quality of the services provided to its stakeholders.

IDOS has a high dependence on a single donor, the BMZ, contributing ca. 76% of its total budget (institutional as well as research and advisory projects), which might constitute a risk. Third-party funding - apart from BMZ - is both beneficial and essential for several reasons, and might even need to be raised in the future. At the same time it can pose a challenge to IDOS with regards to the permanent tasks it carries out for BMZ and to its own organisational structure.

Staff at IDOS is very international and generally very dedicated and highly qualified both in research and in administration. However, the reviewers are concerned about the understaffing in the service facilities.

Early researcher and staff development and cooperation

IDOS is strongly committed to the promotion of young researchers, professionals and junior staff. The training programmes are beneficial for the participants and at the same time contribute to the cross-departmental cooperation within IDOS.

The institute's collaborators and networks are impressive not only with regard to their sheer amount, but also to the quality of the partners and the conducted projects.

Work results and feedback

IDOS does have a large publication output, both nationally and internationally, peer-reviewed and non-peer-reviewed. It is remarkable that approx. an average of 4 out of 5 journal articles since 2019 have been peer-reviewed. Given IDOS' threefold mission and its therefore diverse target audiences, the reviewers would suggest considering whether this very strong emphasis on peer-reviewed journals (if at the expense of other outputs) may create an imbalance in the overall array of outputs: there is a need to differentiate between the types of text and output, and its intended audience.

The reviewers see IDOS holding a strong position in providing evidence-based input for policy advice and thus playing an important role for the political debates in Germany. The institute's professional external communication contributes to the public perception of IDOS work.

Commentary by the Evaluation Working Group

The evaluation working group agrees with the recommendations of the evaluators. The Evaluation Working Group has discussed the (entire) evaluation report with regard to the aims and the self-concept of the JRF.

Relevance of the topics

IDOS characterises its approach in the self-evaluation report by four elements: (1) a focus on the interdependence of 'development' and 'sustainability'; (2) a research approach that carves pathways towards sustainable futures which are value-based and practicable; (3) a transformative approach at the interface of science, policy and society; and (4) a global partnership approach to research and policy-making.

According to its Articles of Association, IDOS' purpose and object is to "provide policy advice and training assignments on the basis of applied academic research, which it conducts independently, with a commitment to excellence". Furthermore, it "carries out additional research, advisory and training work financed through third-party funding, provided this work is consistent with its purpose and object". The mission statement on IDOS' website specifies (and partly expands) this purpose to conducting "interdisciplinary research, impact-oriented policy advice and internationally oriented training", and its "Institute Strategy 2025–2031" to "conduct empirical, theory-led and application-oriented research on global challenges, enable transregional knowledge cooperation and training, and offer policy advice for sustainable futures".

The reviewers perceived all the projects that had been presented during the site visit highly relevant. They were impressed by their excellent quality and by the presentations given by IDOS scientific staff. IDOS' research approach is a key element for its successful and impactful activities. Since the last evaluation, IDOS expanded its thematic foci and its research activities.

Transfer / interdisciplinarity

IDOS follows a partnership-based approach aiming 'to do research with partners from a country' rather than 'to do research about a country' in order to generate multi-perspective research across different world regions. IDOS' research is interdisciplinary as well as transdisciplinary and combines elements of transformation research (i.e. research on transformation process) and transformative research. IDOS carries out permanent tasks for its target groups, mostly in policy advice. For this, IDOS uses a research-based approach and can make use of its broad networks. IDOS' policy advice constitutes engagement. It takes place via manifold interactions and outputs that are used for policy inputs.

IDOS' training activities contribute to inter- and transdisciplinary cooperation. The diverse scientific expertise at IDOS provides a great possibility for inter- and transdisciplinary activities, the latter especially also through the established relations with non-academic partners.

Given IDOS' threefold mission and its therefore diverse target audiences, the reviewers would suggest considering whether this very strong emphasis on peer-reviewed journals (if at the expense of other outputs) may create an imbalance in the overall array of outputs: there is a need to differentiate between the types of text and output, and its intended audience.

Unique selling point

IDOS' threefold mission – research, policy advice, and training – distinguishes it from traditional research institutions and think tanks.

IDOS' training programmes create long-term relationships with institutional partners for research purposes, a unique feature compared to other institutes. IDOS' training activities allow it to pursue its threefold approach, its research to be transformative as well as to expand its international networks.

IDOS' understanding of good policy advice is that it should be scientifically sound, (politically) independent, effective, in the sense that it informs decision-making and societal processes, and impactful, including contributing to agenda-setting.

International networks

IDOS is well connected internationally, collaborating with ministries, international organisations, and transnational networks. IDOS' international partnerships foster collaborative research with institutions worldwide, particularly in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. IDOS is pushing North-South research partnerships, which the presentations of selected projects during the site visit have shown.

University cooperation

The cooperation with universities serves as a link for the institute's activities to university research. This continuous momentum between IDOS' and universities' research approaches is mutually advantageous. IDOS maintains close cooperation with universities due to a number of joint professorial positions: In addition to the two leadership positions at IDOS being joint appointments with the University of Bonn, two further positions are currently negotiated with the University of Duisburg-Essen and the University of Göttingen.

IDOS staff members have been appointed as extraordinary or honorary professors at six universities, four of them abroad, and contribute to university teaching in Europe and beyond. IDOS regularly offers positions to PhD candidates (as well as a structured doctoral programme focusing on both research and policy advice). IDOS professors supervise both Master's and PhD theses that are conducted at universities and integrate PhD students in research projects conducted at the institute.

The Evaluation Working Group notes that the IDOS has undergone the evaluation procedure with a positive result. The Evaluation Working Group recommends that the General Assembly of the Johannes Rau Research Foundation re-evaluate the IDOS in the regular evaluation cycle.

Recommended resolution

A resolution is proposed to the General Assembly of the JRF:

The next evaluation of the IDOS will be carried out in the JRF's normal evaluation cycle, i.e. probably in 2031.