



Advisory Board to the Federal Government  
Civilian Crisis Prevention and Peacebuilding

**Messages from the Berlin Peace Dialogue 2021**

## **Learning for Peace: How failing can get us ahead**

Annual conference of the Advisory Board to the Federal Government for Civilian Crisis Prevention and Peacebuilding

On 7 October 2021, the Advisory Board hosted the Berlin Peace Dialogue in a hybrid format for the first time. Around 100 participants engaged in lively discussion and shared learning experiences in the Federal Foreign Office, while up to 650 participants were able to join workshops virtually and follow the conference via livestream. The wide range of speakers from various areas of expertise – representatives of different ministries, think-tanks, international practitioners and peace activists – shared their thoughts and best practices.

With this year's Berlin Peace Dialogue, the Advisory Board put learning from negative experiences centre stage. The conference provided an opportunity to take a closer look at the obstacles that prevent successful learning, such as admitting existing risks to a sceptical public, misbalance of administrative overload and insufficient resources for learning.

The withdrawal of NATO troops from Afghanistan and the collapse of Afghan security forces and government allowed the Taliban to return to power in the summer of 2021. Engagement in crisis regions and fragile contexts, such as Afghanistan, is taking place amid many uncertainties. Conflicting political objectives, echo chambers and a lack of political-strategic impact analysis and evaluations hindered political learning processes and resulted in undesirable developments and avoidable casualties. The experience in Afghanistan, both bilaterally and in the international alliance, calls for lessons to be learned for a future policy of crisis prevention, stabilisation and peacebuilding.

Bjørn Tore Godal, former Norwegian Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of Defence and keynote speaker of the Dialogue, shared learning experiences of the Norwegian evaluation on their engagement in Afghanistan. Having headed the evaluation team, he provided concrete impetus for a critical review of the Afghan engagement, such as taking a close and systematic look at the original objectives, means, anticipated results and experience along the way. What can be decisive is making the political basis for conflict resolution as inclusive as possible at an early stage, as well as engaging and coordinating with local and pre-existing structures.

The combination of war operations and measures for conflict management, reconstruction, development and democratisation is prone to major risks. One clear message was that strategic evaluations beyond the project level are needed, evaluations that focus on the entire German public engagement for each context and that can question basic assumptions and instruments. Civilian as well as military engagement must be evaluated regularly by independent experts. Evaluation should be planned from start to finish and allow ongoing adaptation processes and decision-making. Evaluations do not simplify but improve management of the complexity of peacebuilding. The first evaluation of this kind, on the German engagement in Iraq, is almost complete. The ministries currently plan a second one on the engagement in Afghanistan. Both evaluations, however, focus only on civilian contributions. It is crucial to combine the military and civilian contributions due to potential contradictions and mutual impacts.

With four parallel workshops, the Berlin Peace Dialogue went far beyond learning from the Afghanistan engagement. **Nagorno-Karabakh** was discussed as an example in the European neighbourhood where international actors, most notably the OSCE Minsk Group of which Germany is a member, failed to prevent the outbreak of war in 2020. The German and European response was dominated by reactive policy and showed that political ownership often only materialises in times of crisis. Germany and its partners now need to find ways to (re-)enhance the role of the Minsk Group and thus their own political influence on conflict management, given that Russia and Turkey, mostly acting unilaterally, have been the dominant actors since the 2020 war. Germany and the EU should consider which concrete incentives they can provide for peace and a seat at the table, and increase their support for civil society involvement in discussions and future negotiations about the conflict.

Connecting learning at international, bilateral and local level was at the centre of discussion on the **peace process in Colombia**. On local project level, adaptability is key due to rapidly changing conditions. Learning can be hampered in situations where bureaucratic requirements and pressure on accountability and reporting decrease ownership by target groups. Both risk aversion of donors as well as the short duration period of projects hinder successful and sustainable support for the peace process. High-level mediation processes on the other hand need to stretch beyond formal responsibilities and inject creativity. It can be more successful if negotiations take place discreetly, however most foreign governments tend to seek publicity when sending negotiators. International monitoring can support local confidence-building and learning but sensitive information needs to be protected and managed. Sensitive information is often not reaching international decision-makers at diplomatic missions and beyond.

Another focus was on the learning and challenges that result from **private sector engagement in conflict-affected contexts**. There is an ongoing need for mutual learning between peacebuilders and the private sector to discuss and raise peace concerns in connection with corporate investments in conflict contexts. Experience shows, for instance, that land-intensive investment projects (e.g. in the field of renewable energies) are very risky and usually conflict-prone. Consequently, conflict sensitivity, heightened human rights due diligence and readiness to deal with unintended side effects must become obligatory for private actors. To achieve this, government actors should introduce conflict sensitivity in their support of economic development and/or private sector engagement. Guidelines such as the OECD Guidelines on Business & Human Rights are a prerequisite for conflict-sensitive action and should be applied in various countries.

It is important to stress that **mitigating climate change** is not just an environmental challenge but also a foreign policy priority. Integrating and mainstreaming all aspects of climate policy remains a challenge for the administration and other actors. Climate-induced security risks threaten the achievements and gains of development policy. National contributions in response to climate change must be adapted to fragile contexts, be conflict-sensitive and take possible social consequences into account. Climate analysis needs to be integrated by involving scientific communities and civil society. Another key finding is the need for bridge-building between practitioners and decision-/policymakers.

One plenary session focused on the problem of how evaluations can best contribute to learning processes about peacebuilding. Cedric de Coning opened the discussion by highlighting that evaluations need to ask not just whether activities were carried out in the right way but also if they were the right activities to begin with. He added that evaluations will only be successful if they are accompanied by a process that monitors the implementation of the recommendations derived from them. Christoph Zürcher, based on a meta-evaluation of 150 evaluations of development assistance in Afghanistan, seconded this point. He found that not only had the international community constantly overestimated its capacity to bring about change but it had also failed to turn “type one” learning from evaluations, i.e., the recognition and acknowledgement of mistakes, into “type two” learning: a change in practice and approach. Eva Gross, on the other hand, observed that critical monitoring had been crucial in the EU’s decision to discontinue its EUPOL mission in Afghanistan some years ago. She also remarked that while it was never pleasant for a public body to be subject to external scrutiny and criticism, critical reflections from outside were important and also helped the European institutions argue their case vis-à-vis the member states. This linked back to the question of how “type two” learning can be encouraged. Norway, several panellists agreed, had set an example of how to set up a cross-departmental evaluation. The choice of a widely respected prominent personality to head the evaluation team guaranteed that unpleasant findings could not go unnoticed and would have consequences.

### **About the Advisory Board**

By bringing together expertise from both civil society and academia, the Advisory Board supports the Federal Government in the areas of crisis prevention and peacebuilding. It is appointed for four years and comprises 20 experts from academia, foundations and civil society organisations. Its mandate is laid down in the Federal Government’s Guidelines on [Preventing Crises, Resolving Conflicts, Building Peace](#) adopted in 2017. The Advisory Board fosters constant exchange between the Federal Government and civil society. It publishes positions on overarching strategic questions. In addition, it develops contributions on pertinent issues. More information can be found on the Advisory Board’s website: <https://beirat-zivile-krisenpraevention.org/>