

# WORKING IN CRISIS COUNTRIES

Threat of attack, a high prevalence of street crime, poor health care and a traumatised population – these are just some of the difficult circumstances in which GIZ is increasingly being called upon to work. Stefan Opitz explains how it operates.

The names are never out of the headlines: Somalia, South Sudan, Guatemala, Liberia, Afghanistan. I could add many more to the list. Today over half the countries in which GIZ operates are considered states that no longer meet their basic functions – they are known as fragile states. And the number is rising. When we get involved in these countries, our first job is to stabilise the situation and achieve visible successes, perhaps by building a small bridge, for example, or a community centre. In this way, the state re-establishes a presence – and prevents the creation of a vacuum which could otherwise be filled by extremists or criminal gangs. The second step is to generate prospects for people in the medium to long term.

The establishment of the state of South Sudan was a case in point. Just two years later, in December 2013, fighting broke out between the government and rebels that virtually engulfed the entire country. After the temporary evacuation of GIZ experts, a team was rapidly dispatched to provide the country with support. 1.9 million people had been made homeless. As a short-term measure, we supplied food to these people – and to the inhabitants of communities where they found shelter. Over 6.5 million people were suffering from starvation. To add to the woes, there was then an outbreak of cholera.

To speed up the task and cover as large an area as possible, we cooperated with local non-governmental organisations. In the southern parts of the country we were able to carry on with what we had already achieved, for example by providing seed and tools to small farmers we had already trained, to enable them to grow more food. Organisations

such as the UN World Food Programme bought the food and distributed it among the refugee camps. Schools were set up in the host communities and camps, and sanitary facilities



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were built to prevent the spread of disease. We brought drinking water in tanks and jerry cans. Once the security situation had calmed down, we were able to focus once again on intensifying our long-term activities.

Our experts are the key to effective operations in crisis countries. The process begins with the careful selection of staff – even if that often has to be done at speed. And the same goes for the local GIZ workforce. They all have to be experts in their field and capa-

ble of dealing with pressure and heavy workloads. Before departure, our experts are prepared on an individual basis: this may involve receiving background information on the country and security training, and even learning relaxation techniques. And once in the field, they are not simply left to fend for themselves. In locations like Afghanistan they are integrated into a close-knit security network. Since our employees in crisis countries have little free time and are exposed to high levels of psychological stress, they leave the country for a few days at regular intervals.

If we are unable to send personnel into a country for security reasons, we work with well-trained local staff, who receive guidance from our experts from a neighbouring country. We refer to this as remote project management. This is currently the situation in Yemen, where operations are coordinated from Germany. There are also other locations where, for security reasons, it is not possible for GIZ staff to be accompanied by family members. Dangerous parts of the country are off-limits for our colleagues. In spite of the restrictions, our staff in crisis countries are highly motivated. Most have greater scope for input and results are evident more quickly. Moreover, such situations enable GIZ employees to gather a great deal of experience in project management and leadership. Working under difficult conditions is part of GIZ routine. It is a challenge we take very seriously.

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