



Suddenly in the lead

Germany's new role in global health

Lukas Lingenthal

- ▶ Germany has taken on a leading role in global health as a result of the United States' withdrawal. This provides an opportunity to leverage this leadership role further in terms of foreign policy and geostrategy.
- ▶ Germany enjoys a high international reputation, not only because of its financial commitment, but also because of its reliability, and its excellent scientific and economic structures in the health sector.
- ▶ A strong commitment to global health is an expression of international solidarity, and a contribution to one's own security and economic stability. Germany should systematically anchor this dimension in its foreign and defence policy.
- ▶ Germany should strengthen its leadership role by filling middle and senior management positions in international organisations.

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Introduction

The global health architecture is changing. The United States' withdrawal from its long-standing leadership role in development cooperation and global health policy has created financial and personnel gaps, and has increased the importance of other actors. Germany is set to become the largest donor country in global health, demonstrating its commitment not only financially, but also strategically and institutionally, to strengthening global health systems. This commitment expresses international solidarity and contributes to the country's own security and economic stability.

However, Germany alone will not be able to fill the financial gap left by the USA. Nevertheless, Germany can maintain its leading role even if its financial contributions remain at their current level, which would be a considerable achievement given the generally decreasing funds for development cooperation in Germany and many other countries. Nevertheless, this is a worthwhile endeavour, as global health is no longer a purely humanitarian issue, but a central component of international security, economic and social resilience, and foreign policy strategy.¹ Therefore, it is important not only to fulfil the new leadership role that Germany has been given in global health, but also to leverage it for foreign policy purposes. Through targeted investments, multilateral cooperation and institutional initiatives, Germany can take responsibility and, together with the EU and other like-minded actors, gain geopolitical influence, ensuring that others do not dominate the field entirely.

Global health is no longer a purely humanitarian issue.

Germany in the leading role

Following the United States' withdrawal, Germany is set to become the world's leading donor in global health. It is providing a total of approximately 323 million US dollars to the World Health Organization (WHO) for the period 2024–25.² It is also demonstrating strong commitment to other multilateral initiatives, having pledged 600 million euros to *Gavi - The Vaccine Alliance* for the period 2026 to 2030 at the last donor conference. This consolidates its previous commitment at a time when budgets are shrinking worldwide.³ As part of the COVAX initiative, Germany has committed to contributions totalling almost 1.4 billion euros.⁴ It is also one of the largest donors to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, having contributed over 1.3 billion euros during the current funding period (2023–2025).⁵ Germany also financially supports other global health initiatives, including CEPI (Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations), the Pandemic Fund, UNAIDS, GARDP (Global Antibiotic Research and Development Partnership), FIND (Foundation for Innovative New Diagnostics) and MMV

Germany is becoming the world's leading donor in the field of global health.

(Medicines for Malaria Venture). In total, German contributions to these five organisations amount to around 180 million euros over several years, with CEPI (100 million euros) and the Pandemic Fund (50 million euros) accounting for the largest share.

In bilateral development cooperation, Germany is focusing specifically on expanding health systems, local vaccine production, pandemic prevention and preparedness, embedding the One Health approach, and strengthening sexual and reproductive health, particularly in Africa.

Germany as a global health location

Germany enjoys a high international reputation for its commitment to global health policy. This is not only due to the amount of financial contributions. Germany is also a renowned science location, conducting cutting-edge medical research. Its health industry sector comprises numerous innovative companies that are international leaders in diagnostics, pharmaceuticals, biotech, medical technology, and digital health. In addition, reliable partnerships exist at the state level in science, and there is a strong commitment from civil society in disaster control and long-term development projects. Last but not least, is Germany's support for multilateralism in general and the WHO in particular, which goes beyond mere financing issues.

Germany enjoys a high international reputation for its commitment to global health policy.

For example, Germany's role is evident in its offer to relocate WHO departments and their staff from Geneva to Berlin, thereby saving on operational costs.⁶ The WHO's Global Hub for Pandemic and Epidemic Intelligence has been based in the German capital since 2021, providing a starting point for this initiative. Similar projects are also underway with regard to UNAIDS, which is considering relocating staff from Geneva to Bonn, where they can make use of existing infrastructure.

This is also evident in the commitment of Germany's leading institution in the field of medicine and research: Berlin's Charité. Founded in 2023, the Charité Center for Global Health bundles several functions, including research on transnational health problems, their determinants and solutions; a coordination, communication and service platform for people and institutions both within and outside of research; and an office for national and international health institutions and international global health networks, such as GLOHRA (German Alliance for Global Health Research). The World Health Summit (WHS) in Berlin is also a key event in international global health networking and exchange. Since 2022, the Virchow Foundation has been awarding the Virchow Prize, endowed with 500,000 euros, to individuals who have made significant contributions over many years to improving health and well-being for all. The Global Health Hub Germany (GHHG) is an interdisciplinary network that brings together various stakeholders in global health.

Consequently, there is a broad network and knowledge exchange infrastructure on global health in Germany that integrates the sectors of politics, business, science, and civil society, connecting them internationally. The resulting trust in Germany as a central player in global health explains the high international expectations that have become increasingly apparent, especially following the United States' withdrawal. This is one of Germany's strengths, and it should leverage it more strongly in foreign policy.

Security policy implications

Global health is no longer just a humanitarian concern; it is also a central issue in international security policy. Security policy implications range from the threat of pandemics and antimicrobial resistance (AMR) to the potential misuse of biotechnology and artificial intelligence (AI).

The security policy implications are manifold.

While advances in synthetic biology and AI are opening up new opportunities for medical innovation, they are also creating new risks. Many biotechnological applications supported by AI can be used for civilian and military purposes alike. Furthermore, AI systems can be exploited to develop new pathogens that could be used as biological weapons.⁷ Consequently, the combination of AI and biotechnology is increasingly recognised as a security policy challenge.⁸

Antimicrobial resistance poses a growing threat to armed forces and civilians in conflict zones. Wounded soldiers and injured civilians are particularly susceptible to difficult-to-treat infections caused by resistant germs. In many conflict regions, there is a lack of functioning health systems, which further promotes the spread of resistant pathogens.⁹

The recent pandemic has shown that pandemics not only threaten health systems, but also the economy, society, and international stability. According to the Lancet Commission on Investing in Health, there is a 48 percent probability of a pandemic of similar proportions breaking out again within the next 25 years.¹⁰

Global health policy is also a means of exerting geopolitical influence. Countries that invest in health infrastructure, vaccine distribution or research strengthen not only their soft power, but also their strategic alliances. A stable global health architecture contributes to conflict prevention, strengthens fragile states, and reduces migratory pressure – all of which are relevant to security policy.¹¹

Global health policy is also a means of exerting geopolitical influence.

The economic importance of global health

The health industry is a key sector of the German economy. In 2024, it generated gross value added of 103 billion euros and employed around one million people. With average annual growth of 4.8 percent over the past ten years, it has clearly outperformed the wider economy.¹² The health industry includes companies from the fields of diagnostics, pharmaceuticals, medical technology, biotechnology, and digital health solutions. A key factor in the success of the health industry is its strong export orientation. In 2024, its exports amounted to 160 billion euros, accounting for almost nine percent of Germany's total exports.¹³

The health industry is a key sector of the German economy.

Developing countries and emerging economies are becoming increasingly important for the industrial health sector. These countries offer not only new sales markets, but also opportunities for investment in local production capacities. At the same time, German companies are strengthening the health systems in these countries by transferring technology and building capacity. This highlights the strategic importance of the intersection between health industry and global health. For instance, the German economy has launched initiatives to promote Germany's role as a global health player. The German Health Alliance (GHA), an initiative of the Federation of German Industries (BDI), is the most prominent of these. It brings together companies, scientific institutions, non-governmental organisations, and development cooperation institutions in an interdisciplinary manner.¹⁴

Germany's role in multilateralism

As a nation that relies on exports, Germany depends on stable markets and is therefore a major beneficiary of functioning multilateralism. Germany supports this at all levels. The importance of this was highlighted again when Federal Minister of Health Nina Warken travelled to Geneva for the World Health Assembly (WHA) just twelve days after her inauguration in May 2025. Her personal appearance was very well received internationally. Warken also brought the following key messages: support for the WHO as a central institution for coordinating global health policy, confidence in the reform process – underlined by a pledge of an additional ten million euros in funding –, and Germany's support for the international pandemic agreement adopted at the 78th WHA.¹⁵

Adopting the pandemic agreement is a success for multilateralism. This means that a strategic instrument for strengthening international health cooperation now exists. The agreement is intended to help manage future health crises more effectively, stabilise global supply chains, and promote investment in research and innovation. The agreement also contributes to Germany's economic security and resilience.¹⁶ The One Health approach – the consideration of the links between human, animal and environmental health – which has long played a central role in Germany's global health strategy, is firmly anchored in Article 5 of the agreement. While some cornerstones have already been laid down in Article 12 of the agreement, the exact design of a Pathogen Access and Benefit Sharing System (PABS) mechanism is still open.¹⁷ Details on this, the most controversial point during the negotiations, are to be regulated in an annex to be negotiated by 2026. The aim is to improve access to pathogens and research data while ensuring a fair and functional system of benefit distribution. Germany has a strategic interest in strengthening global resilience while securing its own innovative capacity. In this respect, Germany must play an active role in the negotiations.

Adopting the
pandemic agreement
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Policy recommendations:

- › Germany's high reputation in global health policy should increasingly be used as a foreign policy currency. Germany has built alliances and partnerships in this policy area that could also be valuable in others. At the same time, Germany should leverage its position and partnerships to promote its values of democracy, the rule of law, and human rights, particularly in relation to autocratic actors.
- › Germany should strengthen its leadership role by filling middle and senior management positions in international organisations. Financial and political commitment in global health should result in a strategic personnel policy.
- › Global health is an integral part of security policy. Germany should systematically anchor this dimension in its foreign and defence policy.¹⁸
- › The Subcommittee on Global Health, established in 2018, has prioritised and raised the profile of this issue within the parliamentary landscape. This has also been very positively received internationally. Continuing to prioritise global health in parliamentary work would reinforce Germany's leadership claims.
- › Germany should work within the EU to strengthen Europe's position as a global health actor and ensure that the EU's status reflects its financial commitment. The EU can leverage its economic and trade influence to promote a multilateral and values-based international order.

- › In order to improve resilience, Germany and the EU must also address the risks to their healthcare systems, the security of supply of medical products and active ingredients, and work to diversify these through strategic partnerships.
- › In the negotiations on the annex to the international pandemic agreement on PABS, Germany and the EU should continue to work towards negotiated solutions that do not pit fair distribution of medicines and vaccines against reduced patent protection. Incentives for investment in research and development must be maintained.

Conclusion

In recent years, Germany has become a key player in global health policy, through financial contributions, institutional initiatives and scientific excellence, as well as a strong presence in the healthcare sector. The United States' withdrawal from its previous leadership role has placed Germany in a position to not only meet, but also actively shape, expectations. This is a great opportunity.

Germany should leverage this position strategically by supporting multilateral organisations such as the WHO, investing in global health initiatives and promoting research, innovation and the health industry. Clearly, global health policy today goes far beyond humanitarian aspects. It is a security policy instrument, an economic location factor, and a means of exerting geopolitical influence.

Global health offers Germany the opportunity to strengthen its foreign policy credibility, expand international partnerships, and contribute to the stability of global systems. In an increasingly multipolar world order, Germany can therefore not only react, but also actively shape it as a reliable, values-based, strategic actor.

Global health offers Germany the opportunity to contribute to the stability of global systems.

- 1 The coalition agreement (signed on May 5, 2025) between the CDU, CSU and SPD contains the sentence: "Global health strengthens security, prosperity and resilience."
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- 5 <https://www.theglobalfund.org/en/government/profiles/germany/> (accessed 03.07.2025).
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- 8 <https://monitor.cntrarmscontrol.org/2024/technologische-implikationen-von-ki-fur-biologische-risiken/> (accessed on 03.07.2025).
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The Author

Lukas Lingenthal has been responsible for Global Health in the Analysis and Consulting Department of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. since May 2023. He previously worked as a strategy and planning officer. He began his career at the foundation in 2011 as a trainee in the Brazil office. From 2013, he worked in Berlin, first as an EU project coordinator and later as a country officer for the Andean countries. Lingenthal studied politics and law in Münster and European law in Saarbrücken.

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V.

Lukas Lingenthal

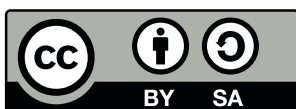
Global Health, Mobility
Analysis and Consulting
T +49 30 / 26 996-3689
lukas.lingenthal@kas.de

Postal address: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 10907 Berlin

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