

Willi Zimmermann 80 - from Black Forest boy to land policy expert on the world stage

What a rich life, what an incredible career: born on 1 April 1945 into a family of small farmers with seven children in the southern Black Forest, our jubilarian's path led him, after training as a surveying technician and engineer, to his first assignment abroad in Cameroon 1967 at the age of 22, where he spent three years demarcating and registering customary land jointly with traditional authorities and training surveyors on behalf of the German Development Service (DED). From there, he for six months overland through the Sahara back to Germany to study geodesy at the University of Technology Karlsruhe from 1970 to 1974, followed by 'higher state examination for land administration' and entry into the State of Baden-Württemberg land consolidation and land development authority. Why land consolidation? Because the topic of land rights and land use probably characterised him from birth and because his lifelong empathy for the rural population led to his commitment to a fairer land policy. He would certainly have become a great land consolidation and land development leader if his other great passion had not led him and his wife Christa, a DED colleague, out into the big world again after a few years, this time - on leave from government services for three years - on behalf of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) to Borneo (East Kalimantan), where the conflicting interests are concerned with the recording and objective evaluation of land resources and land use. This is where his profile emerges as a global campaigner for smallholders and environmental protection through fair land policy and sustainable land management. Back in Europe, his next stop was Portugal, where from 1984 to 1989 he (on behalf of GIZ) was instrumental in supporting the establishment of a modern land consolidation and land development administration in the run-up to accession to the European Union.

Zimmermann's stroke of luck - he was a theorist, strategist and practitioner at the same time

This is where his special ability became apparent: he built bridges between science and practice and in 1985 invited a spectacular conference on "Land Consolidation and Cadastre" to Lisbon, which brought together the greats of German geodesy as well as experts from the International Institute for Geo-Information Science and Earth Observation (ITC, until 2010 International Training Centre for Aerial Survey) and Portugal as well as its former colonies.

After Zimmermann's successful work, Portugal's land consolidation experts are now part of the European family; they come to Bavaria to learn by example. And when the going gets tough, Bavarian experts (e.g. Holger Magel) quickly fly to Lisbon to convince newly appointed sceptical ministers of the blessing of land consolidation. Behind the scenes, Willi Zimmermann, who has now landed where he has become a stroke of luck for German development cooperation (DC) in the field of geodesy and land management, namely at the GIZ headquarters in Eschborn, is in charge of guiding and coordinating land-related development matters. Here, for an eleven-year period, his many skills led to a blessed era of international German land development: his high level of intelligence, his charisma and empathy as well as his special gift for thinking strategically and quickly recognising complex interrelationships and explaining them clearly to people and partners made him what he then was worldwide: the German expert for land policy worldwide, always friendly and modest, never overbearingly dominant. His ability to write clearly structured and comprehensible articles, always with impressive illustrations, was a decisive factor, as many zfv readers can confirm.

Everyone liked and appreciated him, whether professors, lecturers or students, whether many ministers in Africa, Asia, Arabia or Latin America or their officials, consulting offices, NGOs and - not so self-evident - other international advisors.

During this central phase of his life, Zimmermann set up the GIZ sector project "Land Law, Land Regulation, Land Policy", established an accompanying advisory group with academics from a wide range of universities and disciplines and, together with Prof Michael Kirk, coordinated the standard work "Land Tenure in Development Cooperation". The annual meetings of this advisory group - basically a scientific second edition of the Advisory Group on Land Tenure in Development Cooperation (BEV) once founded and chaired by Johannes Nittinger and Gottfried Konecny - were among the annual highlights because they were not only a challenging exchange between theory and practice, but also provided an always highly topical insight into the international scene. They were an ideal preparation for the subsequent FIG presidency of Holger Magel 2002-2006, which Zimmermann passionately accompanied and supported and which, as is well known, pushed the slogan "It's all about Land" worldwide.

In addition to the global coordination of many projects, Zimmermann used his central position to initiate partnerships between German universities and foreign partner universities (e.g. University of Hanover with Zimbabwe and India or TU Munich with Cambodia) or to co-found the postgraduate Master's programme in Land Management and Land Tenure in Munich, where he then held fantastic lectures for almost 20 years. Even the professors sat down in the lecture theatre to learn something new. Or to initiate an international land policy working group on the global stage together with the World Bank (WB), UN-Habitat, UN FAO (Food and Agriculture Organisation), and GIZ from which the annual cult event "Land and Poverty Conference" in Washington emerged, or to play a decisive role in the founding of working groups on the FAO Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure or, or, or there are so many other things to mention that must be omitted for reasons of space.

Zimmermann, Konecny and Zülsdorf - the geodesic triumvirate of German development cooperation

He knew that sustainable development aid is not just about handing over financial resources, but also about investing in people's minds and capacities and that partnerships with partner countries only work if they have well-trained people and institutions that can drive endogenous and therefore sustainable development.

In the 1990s, development cooperation and geodesy were synonymous with the names Willi Zimmermann, Gottfried Konecny (see Christian Heipke's obituary in zfv 5/2024) and Günther Zülsdorf, the much sought-after consultant to the WB, KfW (Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau), GIZ etc.. They formed the geodetic triumvirate of German development cooperation par excellence. There was virtually no international land, GIS or remote sensing conference without one of them as a participant. They were equally passionate, complemented and fertilised each other and passed on their knowledge - benefiting not only the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), GIZ, KfW and universities, but also the German land authorities, which were now finally venturing tentatively onto the international stage.

Cambodia - Zimmermann completes himself in the kingdom of Cambodia

When people in Germany's authorities and universities had already got used to Zimmermann's central role in GIZ Eschborn, he surprised everyone: once again he was driven out into the wide world, this time to Cambodia. He wanted to try out and test how his new concepts and strategies would work throughout the country in an extremely difficult context. In this severely traumatised post-civil war country, he was the right man for the job. The years 2000 to 2005 were the high point in his truly exciting life, as he was not only highly recognised there, but also downright revered by many, although he was also viewed with suspicion by some politicians and land speculators who were only interested in their own advantage. Zimmermann celebrated

impressive professional successes such as the development of the first land policy framework, the organisation of the first Asia Land Policy Conference in Phnom Penh with 20 participating countries or the establishment of a Master's degree course in Land Management at the Royal University of Agriculture (RUA) in order to train the next generation of national surveyors and land administrators or the introduction of the Cambodian surveying sector to the FIG. In 2004, the BEV, under the leadership of Gottfried Konecny, visited their colleague on site and paid high tribute to his work. His legacy was crowned by his successor Volker Müller and moderator Holger Magel in 2014 with the completion of the "White Paper Land Policy". Together with the Ministry of Land, GIZ and TUM organised parallel annual summer schools for RUA alumni, who in turn were taught by graduates of the TUM 'Master's degree programme in Land Management and Land Tenure'. This is exactly what Willi Zimmermann had in mind: training in Munich so that he could then train others at home or advise the minister by his own countrymen. Even after 2005, Zimmermann was still omnipresent: "Willi" remained unforgotten by the Senior Minister and all civil servants and partners - his charisma and empathy for the kingdom had a long-lasting effect. And the kingdom appointed him the rarely awarded "Commander of the Royal Order of Sahametrei".

The DVW, the Federal Republic of Germany and TUM did not want to be left behind: In 2005, Zimmermann was the first recipient of the DVW Prize for exceptional services to surveying, particularly in the field of development cooperation, as well as the Federal Cross of Merit, which - according to the head of the Baden-Württemberg Ministry of Economic Affairs, Dr Hans Freudenberg, at the award ceremony on 26 September 2007 - recognised his role as an "international ambassador of German surveying". In 2009, he was awarded the Gold Medal of Honour "For a Fairer World" by the TUM Sponsors' Association for Land Planning and Land Development in Munich.

Willi Zimmermann - The farewell to Cambodia was typical, by the way: this time it wasn't a hike back to Germany lasting several months, but a decelerating departure by steamer on Southeast Asia's river of destiny, the eternally fascinating Mekong!

Commitment to justice even in retirement

At home in so-called retirement, the tireless Willi Zimmermann together with partners launched the "Arab Land Initiative" in order to open up prospects for the battered Middle East and Northern Africa region in the sector of fair and transparent land tenure and thus opportunities for more peace. It is almost prototypical of Willi Zimmermann that he led a study entitled "Housing, Land and Property Issues Syria" on behalf of BMZ/GIZ back in 2018, which can now be of great benefit following the fall of the Assad regime. Added to this was his involvement in the "Corruption in land and natural resources" section of Transparency International, which is not much loved by autocrats and the land mafia. Needless to say, Willi Zimmermann was also involved in the China-wide summer schools organised by TUM, Renmin University Beijing and the Hanns Seidel Foundation.

Willi is still very welcome everywhere today: Wherever he appears, faces light up and rooms and lecture theatres fill up with his bright, positive energy. That is the secret of this self-contained man from the Black Forest, to whom Germany and, above all, German geodesy in all its branches owe an infinite debt of gratitude. All his friends, whether in the Middle East, Africa, Asia, Latin America or here in Germany, are calling out to him on his birthday: "Thank you, dear Willi. You have done so much for us, so much for the world. We wish you a long and healthy life with your loved ones and friends."

FIG Honorary President Prof. Holger Magel, Munich

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