

What to know about Germany's new development minister

By **Andrew Green** // 15 December 2021

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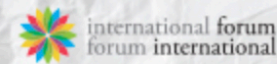
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German Development Minister Svenja Schulze is sworn in by Parliament President Baerbel Bas during a session of the Bundestag on Dec. 8. Photo by: Fabrizio Bensch / Reuters

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Within the German cabinet, the [Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development](#) has traditionally been viewed as lesser among equals. Known as BMZ, it is regularly subject to [debate](#) over whether it should even exist at all or just be folded into the [foreign ministry](#).

But Germany is entering a new political era, as Angela Merkel officially stepped down as chancellor last week after 16 years in power to be [replaced by](#) Olaf Scholz of the Social Democratic Party. He heads an unprecedented governing coalition that combines the SPD with the progressive Greens and the libertarian Free Democrats.

As the parties divided up the ministries, the SPD claimed BMZ and Scholz appointed a veteran of Merkel's last administration, former environment minister [Svenja Schulze](#), to lead the ministry. Skilled at both domestic and global diplomacy, she is seen as one of the more progressive voices within the SPD on climate policy at a moment when the issue is set to take on a central role both in BMZ and across the new government.

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That means, observers said, that she and her new ministry could be positioned to have a significant impact.

“The ministry has a huge budget and a key role to play when it comes to all aspects of international cooperation, especially when it comes to climate,” said Stefan Krug, the political director of [Greenpeace Germany](#). “This is the ministry when it comes to implementing financial agreements that the German government has given huge responsibility,” particularly in helping countries in the global south mitigate and adapt to the impacts of climate change.

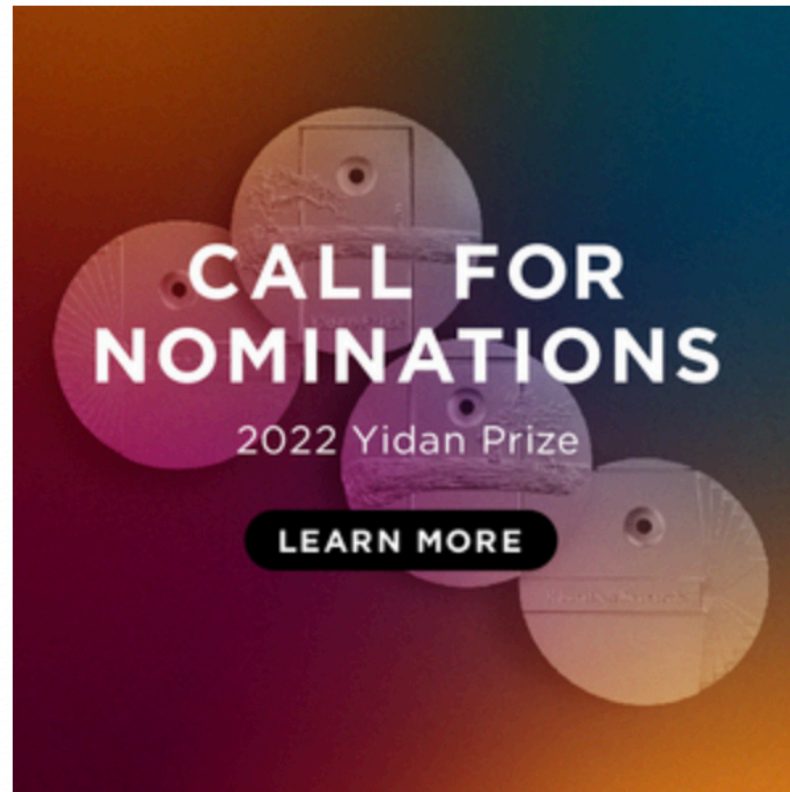
Schulze was a [relatively unknown](#) SPD member of the Bundestag, or the lower house of parliament, from the western state of North Rhine-Westphalia when she was tapped to lead the environment ministry four years ago under the coalition government led by Merkel’s Christian Democrats, or CDU, with the SPD as a junior partner.

“There is reason to be optimistic that they will manage to bridge the climate and development agendas and mainstream climate into the development policy of the German government.”

— Lutz Weischer, head of policy, Germanwatch

Schulze established her bona fides battling for more progressive environmental policies, though she often ran up against the more conservative CDU and even members of her own party. She was forced to acquiesce to an agreement to [phase out coal use](#) by 2038. But she let environmental activists, who were furious with that timeline, know that she was in favor of something more ambitious, Krug said.

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The new coalition has agreed to accelerate that timeline to phase out coal as early as 2030.

Schulze was more successful on other fronts, particularly in pushing a [climate change act](#) adopted by the federal cabinet in 2019 that included binding targets for each sector, compelling ministers to lay out the steps they would take to hit those goals.

“What she managed to do is to make climate a responsibility for all concerned ministries,” said Lutz Weischer, [Germanwatch](#)’s head of policy in Berlin. “She made sure with the climate change act that there is accountability and responsibility with those ministries that can actually have an impact on emissions.”

Though she was rumored for other positions, observers said that Schulze ultimately seemed a natural fit for a ministry that will be climate-focused and is expected to play a heightened role in Germany’s climate diplomacy. The [coalition agreement](#) specifically spells out commitments to improve the transfer of renewable technology and to strengthen climate forest preservation and reforestation.

“She knows the international dynamics and structure of the climate negotiations and she knows the financial dimensions of this issue,” Krug said. And she is bringing along a staff that can supplement her experience, including her deputy at the environment ministry, State Secretary Jochen Flasbarth. Flasbarth, who will also be her deputy at BMZ, has been closely involved in global climate negotiations.

“There is reason to be optimistic that they will manage to bridge the climate and development agendas and mainstream climate into the development policy of the German government,” Weischer said.

Of course, climate won't be Schulze's only focus. The new coalition has pledged to continue to spend 0.7% of its gross national income on aid while committing 0.2% of those funds to least-developed countries. The coalition agreement also calls for a review and possible revision of [BMZ 2030](#), the process spearheaded by Schulze's predecessor, Gerd Müller, to overhaul the ministry. It involves cutting support to dozens of countries and phasing out bilateral support for some programs.

While Hieke Spielmans, the managing director of [VENRO](#), the umbrella organization for German development and aid groups, did not specifically name BMZ 2030, she warned “that people in the poorest and most fragile countries are increasingly falling out of focus. Development cooperation is increasingly concentrating on a few selected countries and on promoting private investments.”

In addition, Schulze’s successful efforts to rationalize environmental policy across ministries may serve as an important precedent at a time when civil society organizations are demanding that the responsibility for implementing the 2030 agenda not be restricted only to the development and environment ministries.

“The entire federal government must aim at global sustainability,” Spielmans said, pointing specifically to the ministries of economic affairs, of agriculture, and of transport. “As of today, these ministries do not pay enough attention to the negative effects of their policies on people in the global south,” she said.

In addition to its emerging policy significance, BMZ should have new political importance under the latest coalition.

The Greens claimed the foreign ministry, as well as the environment ministry and a newly created Ministry of Economics and Climate Protection. That distribution means that BMZ could prove an important outlet for an SPD looking both to collaborate with the Greens on these issues and to establish the primacy of its own foreign and environmental policy.

“Social Democrats want to be seen as a political force that has its own international policy ideas and foreign policy agenda,” Weischer said. “BMZ will be the ministry to develop and implement that.”