



## **Strategy for Sweden's development cooperation with civil society 2025–2029**

### **1. Starting points and the added value of civil society**

Civil society organisations are important partners in implementation of Swedish humanitarian aid and development cooperation. These organisations have added value through their local presence and ties, and can create opportunities for people themselves to influence and improve their living conditions. Civil society provides increased opportunities for marginalised or under-represented groups and minorities to exert influence. Local civil society organisations can be crucial in implementing development assistance initiatives, particularly in conflict environments and in difficult security contexts. They also constitute an important part of a country's democratic foundation.

The aim and added value of this strategy is to contribute to a vibrant and pluralistic civil society in developing countries, and its ability, capacity and capability to create improved living conditions for people living in poverty and oppression in an effective and results-oriented manner.

A strong civil society in developing countries is important to be able to implement Swedish development assistance across a large number of other strategies. There are also clear synergies with Swedish interests in the broader field of foreign policy, such as democratic development, peace and security.

### **2. Direction and objectives for Swedish development assistance**

The objective of Sweden's international development assistance is to create preconditions for better living conditions for people living in poverty and under oppression.

The strategy will apply in 2025–2029 and covers the funds allocated under appropriation item 5 in the appropriation directions for the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) for each budget year.

Activities will contribute towards the following objectives in two areas:

#### **Strengthened capacity of civil society in developing countries**

- Increased capacity of civil society and its target groups to organise themselves on issues that concern democracy, human rights, the rule of law, gender equality, free market and property rights, accountability, tolerance, anti-corruption and/or peace and security.
- Increased effectiveness, local support and transparency among civil society actors.

#### **An enabling environment for civil society in developing countries**

- Enhanced space for an independent and pluralistic civil society.

- Improved conditions for dialogue and collaboration in civil society, and between civil society and other actors.
- Improved conditions for civil society actors to act independently and find diversified financing.

### 3. Context

Civil society refers to an arena – separate from the state, the market and private households – in which people organise themselves and take collective action based on common interests. This area includes networks, non-profit organisations, faith communities and actors in the independent cultural sector, etc. In civil society, people – young and old – can come together and make their voices heard on common issues. A free and vibrant civil society is essential for democratic development and sustainable democracy.

Swedish civil society can play an important role in supporting democratic civil society actors in developing countries.

Democratic backsliding remains a global trend. It restricts human rights and limits the space in which civil society can operate. Along with autocracy and oppression comes increased risks, threats and restrictions on civic space. Administrative barriers aimed at controlling and limiting civil society are created in several areas, which lead to difficulties for both civil society organisations and donors.

### 4. Activities

The strategy will enable flexible support to civil society in developing countries, with the possibility to adapt cooperation to changes in context. Activities will help safeguard civil society and its space to operate freely and safely. It is a priority that activities also strengthen local ownership. Implementation of the strategy also aims at enabling civil society organisations in developing countries to improve their thematic, organisational and financial capacity, and also in terms of internal democracy and learning based on their own priorities and as independent actors. Implementation may include activities that provide global added value and those that relate to a specific region or a specific country. This strategy may include local initiatives where the situation is such that civil society is in need of increased support, but where there is lack of opportunity under bilateral or regional strategies, or where there is no such strategy.

Support will aim to strengthen organisations' democratic working methods and equitable and gender-equal internal structures, including within management. It is important that civil society organisations are not only democratic in a formal sense, but also operate in a democratic manner in practice.

Activities carried out by organisations that receive support through this strategy will be guided by the four principles of participation, non-discrimination, accountability and transparency.

It is important that the organisations have strong support in the contexts in which they operate and act with legitimacy and representativeness in relation to the organisation's target group. It is also important that the organisations operate in a way that promotes international law, including human rights and freedoms and international humanitarian law.

Sida will ensure that activities contribute to increasing the participation, influence, representation and involvement of women and girls in civil society organisations and in advocacy efforts at global, regional, national and local level. Investment in the younger generation is how development assistance can help lay the foundation for more long-term improvement in the level of welfare in poor countries. For these reasons, attention should also be given to activities that include children, their experiences and life situations.

Internationally agreed principles on aid and development effectiveness will be applied. Support for policy and method development may be included, as well as support to increase civil society's own aid and development effectiveness.

Activities will promote the participation of a broad and diverse range of organisations that are rooted in democratic values. Both formal civil society organisations and informal actors, including networks such as democracy movements and human rights defenders, will be eligible for support. Activities must also take account of both new and established civil society organisations.

Sida will regularly review its selection of organisations that receive support so as to contribute to a pluralistic civil society and the emergence of new pro-democracy actors. The review will be based on a changing global landscape, taking account of the Government's development assistance policy priorities and in dialogue with the Government Offices (Ministry for Foreign Affairs). In addition, Sida will work to ensure transparency in the process of selecting partner organisations and ensure that these organisations fully apply and actively promote democracy and the rule of law.

It will be possible to include small-scale activities, as well as support to activities in repressive environments, such as human rights defenders and particularly vulnerable civil society actors. Another priority is to facilitate efforts by organisations to support vulnerable, weak and/or informal civil society actors, and to facilitate particularly innovative measures with the potential to make a catalytic contribution to the strategy's objectives.

Grants to civil society organisations will target activities whose aims are as far as possible in line with the Government's development assistance policy priorities under the reform agenda, 'Development assistance for a new era – Freedom, empowerment and sustainable growth' (UD2023/17726). Activities may include civil society organisations working on combating poverty through job creation, good working conditions, trade and education, improving health for the most vulnerable, promoting freedom and fighting oppression, including against Christians and other religious minorities, improving the environment and climate,

strengthening women's and girls' empowerment, strengthening synergies between development assistance policy and migration policy, humanitarian assistance to save lives and alleviate suffering, including efforts at the intersection of humanitarian support and development assistance .

Organisations, networks or other civil society actors may to a certain extent receive support for participation in normative dialogues and method development aimed at influencing international normative policy development in areas covered by the strategy.

Sida will provide and distribute support in accordance with the implementation model as described in the annex to the strategy.

As regards civil society organisations that are not based in developing countries, (at least) 15 per cent of the activities they conduct with support of the strategy must be financed from the organisations' own funds. In dialogue with actors, Sida should encourage them to diversify their financing.

The civil society organisations that Sida supports will strive for a long-term approach in their operations and sustainable conditions for financing their activities, not least through a range of financiers.

Sida will actively steer the activities toward the strategy's objectives and ensure that these serve as the basis for follow-up of actual results. The annual strategy report will be comprehensive and include a report, analysis and assessment of the results of the activities in relation to the stated objectives. Information concerning results will be used for decision-making, learning and accountability, and to ensure transparency towards the general public. The follow-up will provide reliable and useful information about results in both the short and long term by means of both qualitative and quantitative information, where possible.

Organisations receiving support are responsible for the design, content and control of their activities. Sida will steer activities through guidelines and regular follow-up that ensures that the strategy is implemented in a relevant and effective manner. Sida will ensure that partner organisations are transparent in decision-making processes and report on the outcome of their activities. Sida will also ensure that civil society organisations based outside of developing countries report how much of the Swedish support is divided between activities in the partner countries and costs in their home country.

Sida and organisations receiving support will ensure that civil society recipients of support do not have links to violent ideologies, extremism or Islamism and that they support democratic values and human rights. In addition, Sida and partner organisations will ensure that support does not contribute to activities that counteract the rules-based international order and Swedish interests.

Support will be allocated following application procedures based on rules and criteria designed and approved by Sida.

Organisations that receive support through this strategy may seek coordination and collaboration with activities financed by other strategies so as to achieve synergies and enable financing of initiatives in areas where two strategies overlap. This is particularly relevant in relation to humanitarian assistance.

Sida will request that, in their reports to Sida, organisations as far as possible provide an account of how synergies are utilised in activities in relation to funds from the civil society organisations appropriation (appropriation item 5 in the appropriation directions for Sida) and other appropriations, such as other thematic or geographical strategies. Sida will also develop and implement an adapted and simplified financial reporting model and simplified accounting requirements for small organisations that receive grants of less than SEK 1 million. This model will be used as of 1 March 2025.

Transparency in the reporting of funds allocated through the strategy will increase. All organisations that receive support through this strategy will report data to Sida on how the support is used. Not least, the results from the organisations' activities must be reported, in addition to implemented activities. Where relevant, reports will also show the country to which the support can be linked. Sida will ensure that all data reported is easily accessible to the general public via digital channels, such as OpenAid.

Activities will be followed up and reported in line with what is prescribed in the current guidelines for development assistance strategies. The annual strategy report will include a report, analysis and assessment of the results of the activities in relation to the stated objectives. Where possible, gender-disaggregated statistics will be included in activity reports.

## **Annex: Implementation model for increased local ownership**

With the aim of building vibrant civil society organisations in low- and middle-income countries for a future beyond development assistance and to bring development assistance closer to partners in accordance with the commitments of the localisation agenda, Sida will use the model described below for implementation of the Strategy for Sweden's Development Cooperation with Civil Society 2025–2029. Through this model, the Government aims to increase the transparency and traceability of development assistance, clarify the results, leverage the Swedish resource base while ensuring competition, efficiency and development, and safeguard pluralism and innovation.

Support under the Strategy for Sweden's Development Cooperation with Civil Society in 2025–2029 will consist of three parts, with the following **allocation of funds**:

**Part one:** Partnerships between civil society organisations, where support is forwarded to civil society organisations in official development assistance (ODA) countries through cooperation with civil society organisations in Sweden or another country.

**Part two:** Support to policy work and method development, as well as to civil society organisations' quality and transparency efforts (up to 8 per cent of total strategy volume).

**Part three:** Direct support to civil society actors based in an ODA country (up to 8 per cent of total strategy volume).

**Part one**, partnerships between civil society organisations, will be based on an application procedure open to all civil society organisations. Sida will ensure that civil society organisations that receive support represent a diverse range in terms of thematic areas, geographical focus and size. There must be scope for small, medium and large civil society organisations to receive support. Support under this strategy may not be provided to political parties in ODA countries or to their affiliated associations.

Civil society organisations within part one can themselves implement and/or forward support to local organisations in ODA countries in accordance with applications and agreements. Administrative tasks for which Sida is responsible may not be transferred.

In general, forwarding of funds in more than one agreement level should be avoided. Sida may grant exemptions that are well-motivated. Forwarding of funds does not refer to transfers between offices in Sweden and ODA countries in the same organisation, or between national/regional organisations in ODA countries and their local branches. Agreements with Sida will cover implementation of the entire project, including any potential forwarding of funds, to ensure that Sida's opportunities for monitoring and follow-up are unrestricted. Swedish organisations can jointly submit an application to Sida, as long as each organisation signs an agreement with the agency.

Civil society organisations that receive direct support from Sida must demonstrate their added value and relevance in partnerships with local organisations in ODA countries. In exceptional cases, support can be granted to local actors in non-ODA countries in the EU's neighbourhood when the aim is to support implementation of the strategy, and when the activities are in line with OECD DAC criteria for international development cooperation. Actors in exile from their countries of origin may also be included.

Civil society organisations must have adequate procedures for monitoring results or demonstrate ambitious improvement efforts aimed at achieving this and which lead to a robust system during the agreement period. Sida is responsible for formulating guidelines along these lines, in dialogue with the Government Offices (Ministry for Foreign Affairs). Support to capacity-building initiatives for local civil society organisations in ODA countries may be included. With the aim of strengthening local ownership, Sida will work to increase the share of support that reaches local organisations in ODA countries. To this end, Sida and civil society organisations will identify efficiency opportunities and, if necessary, include efficiency requirements in agreements. In addition, the share of support that reaches local organisations in ODA countries will be publicly reported, for example via [openaid.se](http://openaid.se).

In order to harness the Swedish resource base and boost Team Sweden's impact, at least 90 per cent of the funds within part one will be provided as support to Swedish civil society organisations' activities in ODA countries for their cooperation with local organisations in ODA countries.

Part one will also contain a separate opportunity for a diverse range of innovative actors to apply for support, including small organisations or organisations that work with smaller grants. This support will contribute to a pluralistic civil society and achieving results in ODA countries, while leveraging the added value of Swedish civil society organisations in the recipient regions. This part of the support will go to civil society organisations that meet Sida's requirements – organisations that through a close partnership with local civil society organisations in ODA countries and particularly innovative initiatives, or in other ways have the potential to make a catalytic contribution to the strategy's objectives and the Government's development assistance policy priorities.

In order to particularly safeguard the breadth and pluralism of the smaller Swedish civil society organisations, but also to encourage innovation and the involvement of new civil society actors, a specific window within part one amounting to at least SEK 50 million will be allocated to Swedish organisations that work directly with an organisation in an ODA country, for support of up to SEK 1 million through an adapted and simplified model.

To ensure capacity, quality and transparency, Sida will offer support to these organisations with regard to matters such as financial accounting, auditing, risk analysis and management,

and reporting of results. In this way, these organisations' activities can be safeguarded even though small-scale organisations are not as cost-effective as larger organisations.

Also included in part one, at least SEK 120 million will be allocated to support Swedish civil society organisations within the range of over SEK 1 million and under SEK 5 million.

**Part two** refers to support to global, regional and national organisations that work with policy and method development, with the aim of strengthening and developing the strategy's second objective area: An enabling environment for civil society in developing countries. Support may be provided to organisations, networks and civil society actors based in ODA and non-ODA countries, including Swedish civil society organisations. Activities will exclusively aim at enabling civil society organisations based in ODA countries to strengthen local ownership, local support and internal democracy, to work effectively, to enable new innovative ways of working, to make use of the opportunities offered by digitalisation and broaden their domestic funding base, and to contribute to concrete improvements regarding civil society's space for democratic action. Accordingly, the funds cannot be used for advocacy, information or lobbying targeting non-ODA countries.

To support quality and transparency efforts, Swedish civil society organisations that receive funds through the strategy under part two can apply for up to 80 per cent of their costs for quality assurance via the Humanitarian Quality Assurance Initiative (HQAI).

**Part three**, direct financial support to local civil society actors in ODA countries, aims to strengthen what Sweden offers to local civil society in ODA countries by further enhancing the localisation agenda and local ownership. This will finance activities in countries where Sweden, through Sida, conducts active development cooperation. Application procedures under part three will be open to local and regional organisations based in ODA countries. Initially, this support can be managed from Sida's headquarters, but in the long term, it will be transferred to missions abroad to the extent possible so as to enable close cooperation and minimise risks. The number of organisations supported under part three will gradually increase during the strategy period. Part three will complement part one to reach actors that lack partnerships with other civil society organisations or for other reasons cannot receive support through part one but that are considered able to contribute to the strategy's objectives. It should be possible to include support to human rights defenders and particularly vulnerable civil society actors in repressive contexts, and also support to capacity-building initiatives.

To contribute to a range of actors under the strategy, Sida will ensure that local organisations that receive support directly from Sida represent a range of civil society organisations in terms of thematic areas, geography and size, whose activities are relevant to the implementation of the strategy. Agreements amounting to less than SEK 1 million and between SEK 1 million and SEK 5 million will also be included. Sida can introduce an

adapted and simplified model that in time can be managed by missions abroad. It should be possible to include small-scale activities, as well as support to activities in repressive contexts, including human rights defenders and particularly vulnerable civil society actors.

Sida will conduct a pilot project so that civil society organisations can receive support through project-specific calls for expressions of interest in thematic and geographical areas that are of high priority to the Government, such as children's rights in war-time Ukraine, gender equality and women's and girls' empowerment, work with local election observers or projects that improve the business and trade climate in ODA countries.

### **Agreement duration**

Sida will ensure a long-term approach and predictability of planning in agreement processes. A long-term approach will be weighed against the organisations' success in developing partnerships and activities that are viable beyond development assistance.

The agreement duration may vary from one to five years.

### **Calls for expressions of interest**

Sida will regularly review its choice of organisations that receive support so as to contribute to a pluralistic civil society and the emergence of new pro-democracy actors. This review will be based on a changing global landscape, taking account of the Government's development assistance policy priorities and, where necessary, in dialogue with the Government Offices (Ministry for Foreign Affairs).

Furthermore, Sida will work to ensure transparency in the process of selecting partner organisations. Support will be granted through a competitive procedure that is open, transparent and inclusive, and where selection criteria and the selection process, as well as other rules and criteria that Sida designs and approves, are known in advance. It is also important that it is clear why a project is selected. It is crucial that all organisations that receive Swedish support have appropriate procedures to both detect and manage corruption in its various forms. Zero tolerance applies to corruption, and organisations that allocate Swedish development assistance must have working methods that detect and correct potential deficiencies and risks early on, as well as procedures for recovery of assistance funding, including by legal means. Sida will also ensure that partners have appropriate procedures to prevent conflicts of interest at all levels of their activities.

Calls for expressions of interest will be announced regularly during the strategy period and drawn up on the basis of experience from previous calls and in dialogue with the Government Offices (Ministry for Foreign Affairs). This is to enable new civil society organisations to apply for support. Small organisations will be able to apply for support every

year using a simplified application procedure, and large organisations will be able to do so every two years.

Sida will ensure that decisions on the allocation of funds are characterised by professionalism, impartiality and transparency. Particular focus will be on mapping and tightening the internal routines against conflicts of interest. The shortcomings identified by Sida's internal auditors must be corrected.

### **Results monitoring**

Sida will ensure the legality, transparency, good internal governance and control, and cost-effectiveness in all levels of the operations.

The responsibility for reporting results of the activities will be guided by the principle of subsidiarity. This means that the results reported from the implementation will in part be gathered from local partners and be as concrete and measurable as the activity allows. This part will be attached to the contracting party's results report to Sida and made available on [openaid.se](http://openaid.se) or equivalent, provided that the information can be published from a security perspective and is not subject to confidentiality.

Sida will develop its reporting requirements with a focus on ensuring that reporting is relevant and comprehensive in relation to the strategy objectives. The ability to aggregate, attribute and analyse results at all activity levels is particularly important.

### **Diversified financing**

In order to strengthen the capacity of Swedish organisations to diversify their financing, funds from the strategy may be used to finance civil society organisations' own contribution when funding is applied for under EU development assistance or other development financiers.