

An extraordinary relationship



A few words about the study

The study “An extraordinary relationship – Swedish support to the peace process in El Salvador 1979–2001” examines the roles played by actors within different policy areas during more than two decades of cooperation between Sweden and El Salvador.

The objectives of the study are to document Swedish support to El Salvador 1979–2001, to analyse the effectiveness and strategies of this support, the relationships between Swedish actors and Salvadoran counterparts and to present lessons learned, both concerning support to conflict management in other parts of the world and within Swedish development cooperation in general.

The study is based on the team's studies of Swedish and Salvadoran archives, slightly more than 100 interviews with relevant actors around the world, a seminar in Sweden and several meetings with a reference group in El Salvador.

The study is available in Spanish and English.

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The year was 1979 and Central America had taken its place on the Swedish world map. In El Salvador increasing repression would soon lead to civil war.

Sweden voted in the UN, for a resolution demanding respect for human rights and an end to US weapon shipments to the Salvadoran army. At an early stage, the Swedish government declared itself in favour of a peaceful solution to the conflict.

The Swedish non-governmental organisation Diakonia opened an office in Central America and initiated support to the civilian population caught in the crossfire in El Salvador. Swedish Church Aid (Lutherhjälpen) and AIC (later renamed the Olof Palme International Centre) soon followed. For most of the 80s, El Salvador was the largest recipient of Swedish humanitarian assistance in Latin America. Churches and solidarity groups raised funds and worked to mobilise public opinion on the conflict.

Sweden received political refugees from El Salvador; the Swedish social democratic party acted through the Socialist International and supported politically like-minded actors in El Salvador; Swedish diplomats worked to broaden the political arena and to enhance the chances of a peaceful solution to the war.

These strategies would remain in place, with only slight modifications, until the Peace Accords were signed in January 1992.

After this date, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) became an actor in its own right in El Salvador. A large part of the support was used for the implementation of the reforms stipulated in the Peace Accords. Swedish non-governmental organisations also took on new roles: from previously distributing humanitarian assistance, they gradually focussed on more long-term development cooperation through, among other things, support to local democracy processes and the promotion of children's rights.

Towards the end of the 90s the Peace Accords had ceased to be the reference point for Sida's support. Instead, housing and humanitarian assistance became the largest items in the development cooperation budget.

During the war – common view and mutual dependence

There were several objectives for Sweden's political and diplomatic efforts regarding El Salvador. Although not formulated in strategy documents, they were clearly identifiable and remained intact over a long period of time. The aims were to work within the UN system in defence of human rights in El Salvador, to enhance negotiation initiatives and to act as a counterweight to US policy towards Central America.

Humanitarian assistance also had a clear political goal. A great deal was used to support refugees and internally displaced persons and, eventually, their own organisations. One aim of humanitarian assistance inputs was also to broaden Swedish contacts with Salvadoran actors and increase knowledge on the situation in El Salvador. The main reason for receiving political refugees was to save

Swedish support in brief:

1980–1991:

Humanitarian assistance channelled through Swedish non-governmental organisations; reception of political refugees in Sweden; political and diplomatic action within UN and other forums; political support to like minded; an active solidarity movement in Sweden.

1992–2001:

Official development cooperation through Sida in support of the Peace Accords, support for housing and humanitarian assistance; support through non-governmental organisations for different thematic areas such as local democracy, children's rights and poverty alleviation through decentralised support to health, water and sanitation inputs.

people who were threatened, however an additional aim was to increase Sweden's credibility and field of action as an international actor.

Politics and development cooperation hand in hand

During the war, Swedish actors – the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Sida and non-governmental organisations – developed a strong common view on the conflict and on what Sweden should do in El Salvador.

The major characteristic of Swedish support during the 1980s is that the same strategic concepts were shared by all Swedish actors and were supported by the highest political level. Political and diplomatic efforts, humanitarian assistance, asylum policy and other support; they were all coordinated and subordinated to overall political goals. This match made the Swedish efforts more effective than would otherwise have been the case.

One factor that facilitated this common view was that the Swedish actors were interdependent. Swedish NGOs depended on Sida for their financing; Sida needed the NGOs in order to maintain a presence in El Salvador; diplomats had limited financial resources at their disposal and therefore depended on both NGOs and Sida to broaden their political field of action.

Long-term commitment and know how

Through its efforts in different national, regional and international forums, Sweden drew attention to the conflict. Long-term commitment and know how about the situation in El Salvador were factors that explain how Sweden could achieve political and diplomatic credibility. The fact that Sweden had no real political or economic interests in the region also contributed. Another important aspect was also that Sweden possessed the funding to provide rapid, flexible support in situations where it was warranted.

Sweden played an important role for the implementation of the International Conference on Central American Refugees (CIREFCA) that subsequently paved the way for dialogue between civil society and the Salvadoran Government and made it possible for thousands of refugees and internally displaced persons to return to their home villages. By means of strategic diplomatic work, Sweden contributed to the UN achieving its role as mediator in the peace negotiations. Sweden supported the negotiation process with resources, but also with political and diplomatic inputs.

Most Swedish goals were achieved, within the political and diplomatic fields as well as concerning humanitarian assistance. It is, however, difficult to find direct causal links between Swedish efforts and results obtained. Such links are rarely identifiable when dealing with complex developments involving many actors and other factors that have bearing on results. Yet another reason explaining this difficulty is that the Swedish strategy was, in most cases, to seek collaboration with others, and thus tended not to act alone.

There was a permanent and direct dialogue with Salvadoran counterparts, especially concerning working towards a negotiated and peaceful solution to the conflict and increasing respect for human rights. These close relationships based on knowledge and confidence characterised the dialogue between Swedish actors and Salvadoran counterparts in wartime.

In times of peace – new roles and new demands

After the signing of the Peace Accords in 1992, Sida initiated direct cooperation with El Salvador. Three areas of support were identified at an early stage: reintegration of former combatants into civilian life, promotion of democracy and human rights and alleviating poverty.

This alignment remained in place during the rest of the 1990s, however over the years the weak interest from

the Salvadoran Government and changes in priorities among other donors exerted increasing influence on the Swedish course of action. Consequently, Sida attempted to find alternative means, among other things by increasing support to Salvadoran civil society.

Increased distance between actors

The Swedish actors entered the peace process with a common view. However, although there were still many reference points in common, Sida and the NGOs involved gradually lost their common agenda.

Sida channelled support mainly through the UN development programme UNDP. A large portion of Swedish cooperation was used to strengthen the institutions created or reformed through the Peace Accords, including the new civilian police force, the Ombuds Office for Human Rights, the election authority and the justice system.

Support to institutions required considerable time resources and faced many unanticipated difficulties. Many actors were involved, both from within the Salvadoran Government and among the donors. Coordination was inefficient and delays were common, not least due to the lack of will on the part of the Salvadoran Government to implement what had been agreed. The fact that Sweden had started to develop proper strategies for its development cooperation also meant that Sida was operating a clearer agenda of its own, as opposed to mainly relying on the priorities of Salvadoran counterparts and continuously taking their views into account, as had previously been the case.

After the Peace Accords, the NGOs initially continued to support their previous counterparts, however far from all these organisations managed to adapt to new peacetime demands. Consequently other operational areas were identified, in many cases with new counterparts.

After Hurricane Mitch in 1998 and the earthquakes in El Salvador in 2001, humanitarian assistance became a

new arena in which civil society played an important role. In connection with these natural disasters, Swedish NGOs, Sida and the Ministry for Foreign Affairs developed a common strategic approach very reminiscent of the shared view that characterised Swedish support during the war years.

Peace Accords as platform

During the first few years after the Peace Accords, most official development cooperation aims were achieved. Swedish support to the disarmament of government and guerrilla combatants was decisive. The importance of the Ad Hoc Commission for democratic development in El Salvador can hardly be overstated.

Regarding support to institutions, results are more varied. In some cases, short-term goals have been fulfilled, while more long-term aims of consolidation have yet to be achieved. In this context, Swedish development cooperation has been criticised for its short-term approach.

Sweden, however, played an active and at times decisive role in its support to the Ombuds Office for Human Rights. The institution received financial support over a fairly long period of time and Sweden also contributed to the solution of a crisis that had paralysed the institution.

In contrast, Sweden did not succeed in influencing Salvadoran economic policy in the direction of more attention to the Peace Accords. Neither the Salvadoran Government nor the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank were interested. Sweden did not have sufficient leverage to force their hands.

As of 1996, relations with UNDP deteriorated as priorities changed within the UN institution and Sweden, consequently, lost its most important ally. Sweden has also been criticised for having depended too one-sidedly on the UNDP. Swedish cooperation never established any bilateral relationships directly with the Salvadoran Government

and was thus left with no alternative platform for dialogue. Nor did Sida open an office in El Salvador, considered by several actors to be a strategic mistake.

Sweden was one of the donors that most consistently utilised the Peace Accords as a platform for its support to El Salvador. As a result, Sweden most likely contributed to keeping the peace process on the agenda longer than otherwise would have been the case.

Towards the end of the 90s however, Swedish support became less connected to the peace process. Due to the government's lack of will to implement parts of the Peace Accords, Sweden instead increased its support to Salvadoran non-governmental organisations, primarily to low-cost housing and local development, and to humanitarian assistance.

Grant-based support will cease by the end of 2005. Cooperation channelled through Swedish NGOs and technical cooperation (KTS) will remain. Several partner organisations and other actors are of the opinion that grant-based cooperation should continue.

Halving poverty by 2015 is one of the greatest challenges of our time, requiring cooperation and sustainability. The partner countries are responsible for their own development. Sida provides resources and develops knowledge and expertise, making the world a richer place.



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