

Strategy for Sweden's global development cooperation activities in the areas of human rights and freedoms, democracy and the rule of law 2024–2028



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1. Direction

The objective of Sweden's international development cooperation is to create conditions to improve the lives of people living in poverty and oppression. Internationally agreed principles on aid and development effectiveness will be applied.

The strategy will apply during the period 2024–2028 and govern the use of funds under appropriation item 13 in the appropriation directions for Sida for each budget year.

In light of global democratic backsliding and serious global events, the overall objective of the strategy is to globally contribute to free, secure, fair and inclusive democratic societies free from oppression and built on respect for human rights and freedoms and the rule of law.

The objectives in the strategy aim to strengthen and protect global norms and processes, independent institutions and systems, organisations, actors and networks that work for human rights and freedoms, democracy and the rule of law, and people who are subjected to discrimination and oppression. As repression increases, there is a need to focus more clearly on promoting people's freedom, increased protection and strengthened resilience, which permeates the formulation of objectives. The strategy aims to utilise the added value that Sweden can contribute to this work.

Sida's activities will contribute to the following objectives.

Freedoms

- Enhanced global, regional and national systems and institutions that safeguard and promote human rights and freedoms for everyone.
- Increased respect for, and protection and realisation of, human rights and freedoms, with a focus on people subjected to violence, discrimination, persecution and oppression, not least defenders of human rights and democracy, women and girls, children and young people, people belonging to religious minorities, people with disabilities and LGBTIQ people.

Inclusive and democratic societies

- Strong and sustainable democracies, including strengthened conditions for free and fair elections, legally certain and effective institutions and strengthened democracy movements.
- Strengthened defence of freedom of expression, free and independent media and an inclusive, open, free and secure internet where human rights and freedoms are respected, and increased security for independent journalists and media workers.

Due process and accountability

- Strengthened conditions for due process, accountability and freedom from corruption, and increased protection of actors in the judicial system.

2. Context

Respect for democracy and the rule of law is key to the enjoyment of human rights and freedoms. Democracy is crucial for freedom, peace and security, and to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Free elections form the basis of democracy. Development cooperation plays an important role in efforts to counter democratic backsliding in many parts of the world. Sweden must be a strong voice and actor for democracy, human rights and freedoms and the rule of law so as to increase people's freedom and combat oppression.

Our era is marked by violence, conflict, coups and security policy changes. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has political, economic and humanitarian consequences far beyond Ukraine. Through its actions, Russia is seeking to change the international rules-based world order. Repression is on the rise, while people's freedom is decreasing in our neighbourhood. Moreover, we are witnessing global democratic backsliding and diminished respect for human rights and freedoms, gender equality and the rule of law, a global education crisis, increased refugee flows, consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, economic downturn, and ongoing and increasing environmental and climate crises. The number of armed conflicts is at a historically high level. This has a devastating impact on people who live in poverty and oppression, both in the short and long term, and particularly affects already vulnerable groups. Today, more than 700 million people are living in extreme poverty, and many more live in multidimensional poverty

where women and girls, LGBTIQ people and people with disabilities often are particularly vulnerable.

Democracy, free, accessible and fair elections in multi-party systems, freedom of expression and assembly, knowledge and education, and open, free and pluralistic civil societies built as much as possible on different people's circumstances and needs are key in efforts to create sustainable societies, reduce poverty, prevent armed conflicts, and contribute to promoting peace and peacebuilding. They are also crucial to ensuring inclusive societies, maintaining accountability systems and combating corruption.

Respect for, and protection of, all human rights and freedoms, democracy and the rule of law are basic conditions for economic, social and environmentally sustainable, peaceful, fair and gender-equal development.

International systems for human rights and freedoms developed to promote, safeguard and defend rights and freedoms are increasingly subjected to serious attempts to undermine them. Freedom of expression is a cornerstone of democratic systems and crucial to people's ability to fully enjoy their human rights and freedoms. A functioning democracy requires freedom of expression, independent media and an open, free and secure internet. Moreover, freedom of religion and the rights of religious minorities are at the core of an open society and need to be safeguarded. However, authoritarian states continue to seriously limit freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and freedom of association, and impede the efforts of civil society and the democratic opposition, including human rights and democracy defenders, journalists, cultural practitioners, and free and independent media. Threats and reprisals, physical attacks, arbitrary detentions and lethal force are becoming increasingly commonplace for human rights and democracy defenders. Particularly vulnerable human rights defenders include people who defend the rights of women, LGBTIQ people, people with disabilities, environmental rights defenders and indigenous people in their human rights and freedoms efforts.

Digital development brings opportunities, but also challenges, for the protection of human rights and freedoms, and democracy. These challenges include malign information influence, misleading information and cyber threats.

In order for women, girls, children and young people, LGBTIQ people and people with disabilities to fully enjoy their human rights and freedoms, poverty and oppression need to be countered. Children and young people need to enjoy their human rights and freedoms and take part in democratic processes and decisions that concern their future. Much of this is called into question and threatened in many parts of the world. Sexual and gender-based violence against women, girls, people with disabilities and LGBTIQ people continues, and impunity is widespread. Human trafficking is a grave violation of human rights and freedoms, and human trafficking for sexual purposes is a serious form of sexual and gender-based violence. Violence against children is also a major global problem.

3. Activities

Sida will carry out, monitor and report on activities in accordance with the Government's applicable guidelines for Swedish development cooperation and humanitarian assistance strategies. The guidelines state that activities will be actively directed towards achieving objectives and that actual performance will be monitored based on those objectives. The annual strategy report will be comprehensive and include an account, analysis and assessment of the results of the activities in relation to the stated objectives. Performance information will be used for decision-making, learning and method development, and for ensuring transparency towards the general public. Monitoring will produce reliable and useful performance information in both the short and long term by using both qualitative and quantitative information where possible. Performance monitoring based on current conditions will establish whether activities have made a difference, in what way and for whom. Statistics will be disaggregated by sex and age where possible.

This strategy contributes to sustainable development based on the 2030 Agenda and the financing for development commitments in the Addis Ababa Action Agenda.

Internationally agreed principles on aid and development effectiveness will be applied. Activities that provide global added value may be included during implementation. The same applies to activities that may be attributed to a single region or country. Global contributions will consist of support to help prioritised Swedish issues gain traction and influence international normative policy development in the strategy areas. Support may be given to organisations, networks or other actors that set standards and play a key role

in issues prioritised by Sweden. In exceptional cases, initiatives can be carried out with cooperation partners/actors in the EU's neighbourhood. This applies to countries that are not receiving assistance in accordance with the OECD DAC when the aim is to contribute to peaceful and democratic development in the EU's eastern neighbourhood. In addition, activities with actors in exile from their countries of origin may be supported. Issues where there is a considerable backlash against globally established norms, and where Sweden represents fundamental values not sufficiently emphasised by other actors in international cooperation, should be considered.

This strategy will focus on initiatives that, in line with the Government's priorities, aim to achieve results to strengthen human rights and freedoms, democracy and the rule of law. Funding includes support within the framework of both multilateral and civil society actors. Focus will be on having a local impact in situations where there is a heightened need to protect human rights defenders, journalists and people in the judicial system. The initiatives that are chosen will complement the initiatives conducted within the framework of other strategies. This strategy may include local initiatives in situations where there is a heightened need for support to safeguard human rights defenders, journalists and actors of the judicial system where there is a lack of opportunities within the framework of bilateral or regional strategies.

Activities will contribute to strengthening and defending international normative systems, institutions and mechanisms for human rights and freedoms, democracy and the rule of law in all environments.

Protecting human rights and democracy defenders will be a key part of the focus of activities. Support to protect human rights defenders, champions of democracy and independent journalists will be particularly prioritised, including in digital environments, and significantly increase during the strategy period. Priority will also be given to support that promotes religious freedom, including the right to freedom from religion, secular legislation and application of the law, and the rights of religious minorities – especially Christians, who currently constitute a particularly persecuted religious group in the world.

Support to pro-democracy movements, including networks and other smaller formalised groups in civil society, will be prioritised. The activities should enable organisations and actors that stand up for human rights and freedoms, democracy and the rule of law to work democratically, securely,

strategically and with a long-term perspective. Strategic support to change agents may be included in activities through support to culture and cultural actors. Activities to create conditions for free, fair and accessible elections will also be promoted, including local election monitoring, and in war, conflict and post-conflict environments. The support may include initiatives that span the whole electoral cycle. State and non-state actors that contribute to enabling free, fair and accessible elections may be supported to the extent that the context allows.

Efforts to promote democracy that contribute to giving all people, not least women and young people, the opportunity to take part in political processes in a meaningful way, and the right to freely make their voices heard and have their views taken into account, may be considered. The same applies to safeguarding freedom of association and freedom of assembly, and promoting a vibrant and pluralistic civil society.

Support should be given to initiatives that contribute to ensuring that freedom of expression such as artistic freedom is safeguarded, including in digital environments. The conditions for, and protection and security of, independent journalists and other media workers, including female journalists and cultural actors, should be acknowledged and strengthened.

An open, free and secure internet is essential. The digital divide needs to be reduced and more people need to be able to utilise the possibilities of digital transformation and its positive effects, not least women and girls. The development and application of secure digital administration is crucial. Norms and principles of human rights and freedoms, democracy and the rule of law need to guide the development of future inclusive digital administration. Support in the digital area always needs to be accompanied by a cyber security perspective, so as to avoid creating new vulnerabilities.

Division of power and an independent judiciary are fundamental to democratic resilience, accountability and the fight against corruption. Activities that strengthen institutions with the aim of strengthening the rule of law throughout the judicial chain need to be promoted, as do initiatives to combat corruption. Anti-corruption work is also key to promoting sustainable economic growth and investments.

Safeguarding actors of the judicial system, such as prosecutors, judges and lawyers, is a prerequisite for due process, an independent judiciary and the fight against corruption, and must therefore be an important part of the

activities. People's, not least women's and girls', access to justice and accountability is crucial. It is important to combat impunity for perpetrators.

A human rights-based approach should permeate all activities, including planning, implementation, results and follow-up, and contribute to strengthening the capacity of those bearing responsibility, i.e. states, to fulfil their obligations. It should also enable rights holders, i.e. individuals, to be aware of and demand their rights.

Activities may contribute to giving people living in poverty and oppression more opportunities to take part in, and contribute to, processes, programmes and decisions that relate to their situation in a meaningful way. Organisations whose primary aim is to promote democracy and human rights and freedoms are particularly prioritised.

Initiatives should be adapted to local conditions, support local ownership and strengthen local capacity as much as possible.

Synergies will be sought between the strategy areas and with activities within the framework of other relevant strategies for Sweden's development cooperation and humanitarian aid. Sweden will promote coherent and effective development and aid coordination, not least with the EU as a key development policy actor and with the multilateral system. Opportunities for collaboration with other donors and actors will therefore be sought. Based on the 'Team Europe' approach, Sweden will work toward effective implementation of EU development cooperation.