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How do Swedish Public Agencies understand, approach and operationalize Capacity Development work abroad?

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How do Swedish Public Agencies understand, approach and operationalize Capacity Development work abroad?

Working Paper No. 2

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Swedish Public Agencies' Capacity Development (SPACAP) Project

SUMMARY

This summary addresses the overall results of the Swedish Public Agencies' Capacity Development (SPACAP) study that started in December 2018, whereas the main body of this second, and final, Working Paper mainly focusses on the way forward. SPACAP is a Sida funded one-year study project conducted by Lund University in collaboration with the SPAs' Network for Learning (N4L), which aims at providing a constructive appraisal of the following questions:

1. What are SPAs' current thinking and approaches to their Capacity Development (CapDev) work abroad?
2. What are the factors that shape (enable or constrain) SPAs' CapDev thinking and practices?
3. What are possible directions for SPAs to provide more effective CapDev support in partner countries in light of sustainable development challenges?

[Working Paper No. 1 \(WP1\)](#) of the study, published in September 2019, highlighted some key preliminary findings and analysis of the first two research questions above and set the context for exploring the last question. The findings were validated during a workshop on 30 September 2019 facilitated by the Lund University team – [click here](#) for the validation workshop summary report.

Key diagnostics and findings – Working Paper 1

- 1) The SPAs have a common understanding of key elements of what CapDev entails in close alignment with Sida's CapDev guiding documents.
- 2) There is a gap between how SPAs think they should work with CapDev and what they actually do in practice.
- 3) The peer status and core competencies of SPAs are highly recognized as unique comparative advantage but reading the power structure under the surface of the partner organization is not easy.
- 4) The myriad of Swedish development cooperation strategies is not helping SPAs to concretize their CapDev work in framing and in practice "as a whole".
- 5) There is often a mismatch between expected outcomes from SPA's CapDev work and the capacities or competencies required to achieve those outcomes.

This Working Paper No. 2 (WP2) followed the same co-creation and collective thinking processes through engaging SPAs practitioners. It drew from findings of WP1 and inputs from a co-creative workshop conducted on 16 December 2019 – [click here](#) for the co-creation workshop summary report. This paper, WP2, focusing on mapping out possible directions

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moving forward based on inputs from the co-creation workshop. It also presents some critical reflections for enhanced collaboration as increasingly envisioned among SPAs as a way to realize Sweden's commitments towards global implementation of the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development.

Key recommendations and reflections moving forward – Working Paper 2

1) SPAs practitioners have co-creatively drawn up a list of recommendations at policy, procedures and practice levels for future CapDev work abroad. They are summarized as follows:

- **To the Swedish government:** much clearer directives with associated core funding should be provided to SPAs. Prioritization should be based on transparent analyses with regards to which SPAs have the strategic relevance, core competencies and added value to certain capacity development contexts and policy areas. The roles, responsibilities and complementarities of SPAs, Sida and the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs should be further clarified.
- **To Sida and SPA networks:** Guidance and support mechanism, especially where SPAs lack expertise or are currently insufficient, should be prioritized. An online knowledge-sharing platform or collaborative learning portal is urgently needed to help replicate and scale-up competence development among SPAs experts, pool expertise, broker partnerships, and synergize various SPA networks and similar initiatives. The platform can potentially be used to enhance transparency and communication with partner organizations.
- **To SPAs:** SPAs should actively engage GD in CapDev work abroad, revisit their internal messaging about *why* they are engaged in CapDev work abroad. They should also consider longer inception phases that allow for careful context analysis, trust and relationship building, and more realistic-priority setting with partners. Monitoring, evaluation, and learning practices should also be strengthened to allow for continuous and timely feedback loops during and after projects.

2) “Systems thinking” and “multi-stakeholder partnership” are imperatives implied by Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development. Sida has been promoting these approaches for some time, which are underlined in the new CapDev strategy. It is clear that there needs to be a common and clear understanding of what “systems thinking” and “multi-stakeholder partnership” mean in SPAs’ CapDev practices, beyond the rhetoric. However, it is also important to note that they are not quick fixes or magic solutions. Some critical reflections are warranted, notably that:

- Development processes are societal changes. Development cooperation, therefore, concerns intervening in complex societal systems. To contribute to transformational change, a shift from a mechanistic and simplistic cause-effect approach towards a complexity-driven one is essential.
- Systems change due to a single intervention is very unlikely. If development cooperation is about poverty reduction, it is important to foster dialogue and negotiations between a broad range of stakeholders, not just the core SPA counterparts, that can defend the poor and to take equity and relational capacities into considerations. This demands time and effort with unpredictable results.
- The business model of development cooperation should be compatible or aligned with the principles of systems thinking, complexity and broad based stakeholder engagement approaches. A consistent partnership for about 10-12 years would allow results to be monitored and learning to emerge. Even short-term interventions need to have a long-term perspective in mind and the ambition to work on structural changes. This way of working calls for a deep understanding of the system, incremental decision-making, and iterative adaptations.

ABBREVIATIONS

CapDev	Capacity development
GD	General Director
LM	Swedish land administrative authority
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MSP	Multi-stakeholder partnership
SADEV	Swedish Agency for Development Evaluation
SCB	Statistics Sweden
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SEPA	Swedish Environmental Protection Agency
Sida	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
SPF	Sida Partnership Forum
SPA	Swedish public agencies
WP1	Working Paper 1
WP2	Working Paper 2

- What capacities need strengthening (for creation, retention or use purposes) of partner organizations and of Swedish experts deployed will have to take into account not only technical core competencies but also functional and cross-functional ones to support systems approaches. The ability of related stakeholders to work together towards a common vision will in fact determine the effectiveness of the chosen intervention.
- Navigating in these complexity-driven contexts certainly is challenging. Doing everything is not possible. For SPAs committed to contributing to transformative change through their CapDev work abroad, they need to be conscious and reflective about what they are good at solving what kind of public administrative challenges in what systems (or sub-systems). It is also important to assess where knowledge/skill/influence gaps exist, whether development of in-house expertise or bringing in external resources/ partners are better investments, and what change can be realistically and incrementally achieved.
- Unconscious weaving of systems thinking or processes to approach complexity may risk interventions falling back into long-established patterns and pathways, doing wrong things better, reinforcing inequity or even creating new conflicts between stakeholders.

Acknowledgements

The SPACAP study grew out of a linked set of common concerns among SPA and Sida CapDev practitioners about coherence, effectiveness, sustainability, and impact of SPAs CapDev work abroad. With a significant number of SPAs engaging in increasingly complex, sustainability-related change processes in partner countries of differing socio-political and development cooperation landscapes, these concerns are deepening. Equally, as meanings, expectations and practices associated with SPAs CapDev work abroad and Sweden's commitment towards the Global Agenda 2030 continue to proliferate, it seems increasingly important to gain a clearer sense of what SPAs are trying to achieve, can realistically achieve individually and collaboratively, as well as about why some programs worked towards systems change in partner countries while others did not.

This study sought to employ processes that promote joint learning and deepen in order to identify real and practical problems as well as positive measures at policy and practice levels. Throughout the study, SPAs and Sida practitioners have shown determination that they would like to do CapDev differently and more effectively; and that they cannot do this alone. While this paper presents some of the formal outputs of the study, the collaborative processes gave rise to a wealth of informal lessons and timely reflections on the past, present and future of SPAs' CapDev work abroad.

We would like to thank Sida for funding this study. We are grateful to the SPAs' colleagues from the N4L for entrusting us with this collaborative learning journey towards more effective capacity development efforts in countries pursuing new and more sustainable development paths. We also want to express our gratitude to all those who participated in the study for their valuable time and insights.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Swedish Public Agencies' Capacity Development (SPACAP) study is a one-year Sida funded study project conducted by Lund University that aims to provide a systematic and constructive critical assessment of how SPAs understand, approach, and operationalize Capacity Development (CapDev) in their international development cooperation contexts. The study seeks to critically explore the following questions:

1. What are SPAs' current thinking and approaches to their CapDev work abroad?
2. What are the factors that shape (enable or constrain) SPAs' CapDev thinking and practices?
3. What are possible directions for SPAs to provide more effective CapDev support in partner countries in light of sustainable development challenges?

The study does not aim to provide a prescriptive formula for change to the Swedish institutional development cooperation policy and practice. Rather, it seeks to stimulate timely discussion and reflection *with* all those involved who are concerned with *doing development differently* and more effectively regarding the institutional conditions that shape SPAs' practices of engaging with CapDev in different partnering contexts and the implications for managing resources, partners' needs, cooperation results, knowledge and partnership arrangements.

SPACAP's Working Paper No. 1 (WP1) (click [here](#) for the paper), published in September 2019, highlighted some key preliminary findings and analysis of the first two research questions:

- 1) *The SPAs have a common understanding of key elements of what CapDev entails in close alignment with Sida's CapDev guiding documents.*
- 2) *There is a gap between how SPAs think they should work with CapDev and what they actually do in practice.*
- 3) *The peer status and core competencies of SPAs are highly recognized as unique comparative advantage but reading the power structure under the surface is not easy.*
- 4) *The myriad of Swedish development cooperation strategies is not helping SPAs to concretize their*

CapDev work in framing and in practice "as a whole"

- 5) *There is often a mismatch between expected outcomes from SPA's CapDev work and the capacities or competencies required to achieve those outcomes.*

These findings set the context for exploring the last question of the study and guided the design of the co-creation processes with SPAs.

A "Way-Forward" co-creation workshop was held in Stockholm on 16 December 2019 with the purpose of identifying the possible directions moving forward with SPAs engagement in CapDev work broad. The discussion was based on the validation workshop held in September 2019 with SPAs (click [here](#) to access the validation workshop summary report). Seventeen practitioners from nine SPAs including Sida attended the workshop. The workshop specifically focused on sharing knowledge and co-creating ideas about what changes and support were needed and attainable at policy, procedure, and practice levels, internally within individual agencies, between agencies, and in terms of SPAs' interactions with Sida in the headquarters and in the embassies. Participants also undertook a gap analysis of the current support mechanisms that help address issues that are common to SPAs. Alternative and new ways of enhancing sharing of knowledge, skills, learning and expertise among SPAs were proposed and discussed. A workshop summary report was shared with the N4L members (click [here](#) for the report)

The focus of this Working Paper 2 (WP2) is on the way forward rather than reiterating any findings already presented in WP1. WP2 maps out possible directions moving forward as discussed during the co-creation workshop and highlights some critical reflections on enhancing 'systems thinking' and collaborative actions in policy and practice based on existing literature.

This paper is structured as follows. It first puts forward the views of SPAs CapDev practitioners about actionable recommendations in the spheres of policy, procedures and practices and in both the intra- and inter-agency contexts, as well as regarding SPAs' interaction with partners, Sida and the embassies. Next the paper discusses the findings from the practitioners'

gap analysis of current support mechanisms for their CapDev work abroad and presents some ideas about what an ideal support mechanism should look like to help enhance inter-agency collaboration in Sweden and in partner countries. Finally, to provoke further discussion and reflection about applying 'systems thinking' and multi-stakeholder partnership (MSP) in SPAs' CapDev policy and practice, the paper concludes with some critical perspectives from existing literature about crucial conditions for bringing out systems change.

2. WAYS FORWARD FOR SPAS TO ENGAGE WITH CAPDEV WORK ABROAD

This section presents the views of SPAs CapDev practitioners about actionable recommendations in the spheres of policy, procedures and practices and in both the intra- and inter-agency contexts, as well as regarding SPAs' interaction with partners, Sida and the Swedish embassies.

2.1 Policy

In the context of this study, policy refers to a course or principle of action to guide decisions and achieve rational outcomes.

One of the findings in WP1 refers to the incoherent directive and funding available to some SPAs to engage in CapDev work abroad. While some agencies are given explicit directives (*skall*), others do not have clear obligations or instructions (*kan*) from their respective ministry of the Swedish government¹ and are therefore more likely to face resource challenges, all of which constrain the possibilities of SPAs engaging in CapDev work abroad. Participants reported difficulty in interpreting the framings of the *instructions*, and the use of vague phrasings (such as ought to - *skall* and if time allows - *kan*), which result in activities that are not prioritized due to limited internal resources. This lack of clarity is especially problematic when there is a change of senior management in the SPAs, since it is difficult to uphold priorities and commitments that currently depend on motivated individuals.

Hence, one of the recommendations put forward by the practitioners was *the need for clearer directives and more coherent messages for SPAs to engage in CapDev work abroad (tjänsteexport)*. If the government really wants SPAs (and associated expertise) to be more involved in CapDev work abroad, all SPAs should have the same directives. This political incentive can help mobilize SPAs' management buy-in and relevant expertise and resources.

Moreover, the issue of uneven distribution of core funding (*basfinansiering*) amongst SPAs has been raised. While some SPAs directly receive grants that allow them to bid for Swedish development cooperation funding and to engage in coordination and learning processes outside the CapDev projects, others must use their own resources. This reality constrains the participation of smaller SPAs in international CapDev work. *Allocating core funding for SPAs to use outside and between projects for joint analysis, coordination and learning mechanisms would provide an enabling environment for SPAs' CapDev work abroad, improve strategic relevance and CapDev practices.*

On a higher level of analysis, Swedish development cooperation strategies lack clarity and specificity on SPAs' role in building effective public management institutions in partner countries. Navigating through these strategies and seeking clarity and guidance tends to take a lot of resources during the project proposal stage, which complicates the decision-making processes within SPAs and constrains the participation of partners and local stakeholders. *There is a need for the Swedish development cooperation strategies to better reflect the thematic expertise of SPAs and connect thematic areas with geographical contexts, since participants report difficulty in operationalizing some strategies in certain geographical areas.*

Furthermore, there is a general feeling that the process of producing the Swedish development cooperation strategies is uncoordinated. *A possible way forward involves a dialogue between Sida, SPAs' General Directors (GD), and the MFA during the*

¹ Förordning med instruktion and regleringsbrev.

operationalization of strategies, to ensure that SPAs' core mandates and competencies are reflected and that geographical realities are considered. The formulation of guidelines on how to select and prioritize projects abroad based on the Swedish development cooperation strategies would allow SPAs to have greater clarity from the beginning.

On the work to be done in the inter- and intra-agency context, *one recommendation is to better define, within each agency, the core mandate and the knowledge and expertise they can contribute to CapDev work in a given set of contexts based on previous experience and knowledge.* This would prove useful when applying for Swedish development cooperation funding, when selecting projects abroad, and when engaging in a dialogue with Sida about the operationalization of various development cooperation strategies.

Finally, *the international departments of SPAs obligated to engage in CapDev work abroad need to be better anchored within the organizations. This requires increased support and endorsement by the GDs and raising awareness about the rationale and value of the engagement and the importance of internal resource readiness for implementing projects and continuous learning.*

2.2 Procedures

Procedures in the context of this study refers to established or officially accepted ways, processes and steps of doing CapDev work abroad.

SPACAP's findings show that the current support on CapDev from Sida towards SPAs is perceived as needing further improvement in nature, quality and quantity. Methodological tools and learning opportunities in areas where there is a capacity gap are lacking, which results in delays in decision making and the occasional setting of unrealistic expectations. In this regard, *the establishment of an online knowledge-sharing or collaborative learning portal for sharing information between the SPAs, Sida, embassies and local partners is seen as a much-needed initiative. Increased digitalization of project documents would facilitate broader access to knowledge and resource exchange.*

Furthermore, Sida's lead on such a platform would enable better coordination and cost effectiveness (this will be further discussed in [Section 3.2.](#)). However, SPAs must also actively engage for such a tool to be effective and sustainable. Finally, Sida Partnership Forum's (SPF) knowledge database portal could serve as a basis for building such a platform.

There is a recognized need to help SPAs adopt "systems thinking" in their CapDev practice in order to contribute to solving complex, long-term organizational and systemic problems in partner countries. (see Figure 1 for some common definitions and a framework for understanding systems change). For this reason, the practitioners emphasized the importance of establishing coordination procedures with different stakeholders based on this approach. *The creation of guidance mechanisms by Sida in areas where SPAs lack expertise (such as in the analysis of context, power relations and dynamics, who and what influences what type of change, existing (dis)incentives for change; adaptive management, multi-stakeholder engagement and partnership building) is seen as necessary.*

System: An interconnected set of elements that is coherently organized in a way that achieves something (function or purpose).
Systems Change: Shifting the conditions that are holding the problem in place.
Systems Thinking: A holistic approach to see how organizational systems, sub-systems, and their parts interact with and influence each other; and how they create and contribute to specific problems.

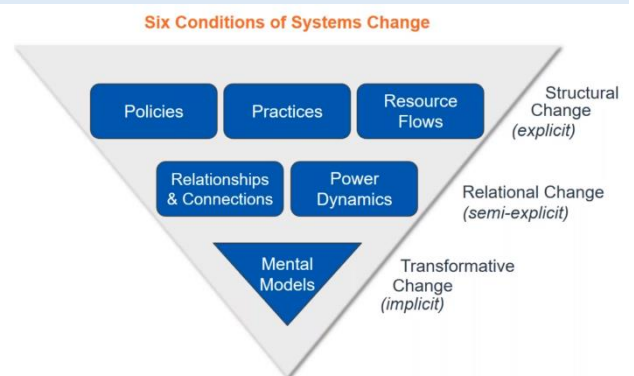


Fig. 1. Common definitions and a framework for understanding systems Change (Kania, Kramer & Senge, 2018. The Water of Systems Change.)

Additionally, *Sida and the embassies should strengthen their role in fostering coordination and communication between different SPAs especially those operating in the*

same countries or policy areas. This coordinating role could be delegated, where appropriate, to SPAs with longer presence, contextual knowledge or broad stakeholder engagement in the countries.

With regards to intra- and inter-agency procedures, *there is an expressed need to continue discussing and reflecting on SPAs CapDev work abroad, with more emphasis on the questions: “What are we doing?” and “Why are we doing this?”, both within and between agencies. This could allow for a more coherent and structured way of working that could enhance value creation and facilitate sharing of lessons and reflections.*

Related to this, practitioners also recommended processes to help institutionalize transfer of information and knowledge across individual SPA, beyond the international department or team.

SPAs still frame the SDGs mostly from a national perspective. The role of SPAs in realizing Swedish commitment to the global Agenda 2030 remains ambiguous among SPA staff. *More elaborate and clearer discussions are needed within and between agencies to interpret these global commitments and to incorporate them into CapDev framings, approaches and practices.* SPAs’ DGs and management staff play a key role when communicating agencies’ CapDev work abroad and their role regarding the realization of Swedish commitments towards SDGs.

2.3 Practice

Practice in the context of this study refers to the habitual or customary action to apply a particular method, process, or a professional standard (e.g. in project management and change management).

As shown in WP1, there is often a mismatch between expected outcomes from SPA’s CapDev work and the capacities or competencies required to achieve those outcomes. SPAs demonstrate far more competencies and expertise in their core mandate and specialized area than in development cooperation, cross-cutting issues, governance or governmental challenges in countries other than Sweden. Greater support and sharing practical advice and tools are needed from Sida, the embassies and other SPAs.

A longer inception phase, with adequate time and resources for sector and stakeholder/network analysis, institutional and organizational analysis, building relationships and trust and adapting to the local context is a key necessity highlighted by the practitioners.

Currently there is little clarity on how long the inception phase could or should be, what it involves and who decides that. There is recognition that different projects require different time scales which, in some cases, necessitate a longer planning process within the SPA, and/or with other stakeholders.

Longer inception phases are also useful when negotiating project goals and responsibilities in a partnership. Often, due to the lack of mutual knowledge, goals established are overambitious and do not contribute to the sustainability of the results. *There is a need to work with partners in setting more realistic goals, based on contextual conditions. These goals should be clearly articulated, but enough flexibility should be kept to adjust actions necessary to changing contexts and if specific approaches are not working.* Additionally, at the beginning of each project, roles and responsibilities should be defined on the basis of the competencies and resource availability of each party.

Finally, *there is a need to strengthen the monitoring, evaluation, and learning practices to allow for continuous and timely feedback loops during and after projects, especially where new approaches are being experimented with or non-linear change processes are expected.* Appropriate mechanisms would allow for project iterations and adaptations when interventions are not delivering the expected outcomes. They would also provide lessons learned and good practices for future projects.

3. TOWARDS AN INTEGRATED INTER-AGENCY SUPPORT MECHANISM

This section presents the views of SPAs CapDev practitioners about the current mechanisms available to SPAs to support their CapDev work abroad and presents some ideas about what an integrated inter-agency support mechanism would look like in order to

help enhance collaboration in Sweden and in partner countries.

3.1. Existing support mechanisms and gaps

The most cited support mechanisms by SPA practitioners were:

- SPF's portal and Sida's resource center, workshops and courses such as "Beyond workshop" and results-based management (RBM).
- Sida focal points as sounding boards during the implementation of the projects (thematic and per SPA).
- The Framework Agreements with Sida regarding specific topics, such as gender equality.
- Agency-specific mechanism such as SCB's new guidance material from conceptualization to implementation and MSB's Introduction to Capacity Development for Disaster Risk Reduction online course.

The above mechanisms are seen as useful to train SPA staff, develop internal capacity, improve project implementation, prepare experts for overseas assignments, stimulate continuous learning, and improve project follow-up activities.

In addition, *several other inter-agency networks were also reported to contribute to SPAs' CapDev work abroad*. These are: Network for Learning (N4L), *Myndighetsforum*, and the GD Forum for Agenda 2030. They are seen as useful platforms to meet other SPAs, to exchange knowledge and experience on issues of common concerns, and as a collective voice to advocate for change at strategic or higher decision-making levels of the Swedish government.

As previously mentioned, *better clarification of the mandate and role of the SPAs in CapDev work abroad could help incentivize mobilization of financial and human resources to engage in continuous professional development on CapDev*. Clear templates or good examples from Sida on accountability documents (reports, evaluations, etc.) are also seen as needed in order to save time and effort when engaging in those processes.

A common online learning platform is currently non-existent and urgently needed to support collaborative efforts and enhance transfer and use of existing resources among SPAs. Such platform can facilitate discussion, information sharing (such as good practices, administrative requirements, country profiles, and mapping of which SPA is doing what, with whom and where) among a broader audience between SPAs, Sida and partner organizations. This platform can synergize with SPF ongoing initiatives by incorporating e-learning and webinars to make knowledge more accessible, especially by short-term experts, as well as partners. The platform could also be used to support partnership building or clustering for collaborative initiatives, and even to serve as a learning management system, networking platform or "hubs" within related policy and public management areas (such as for and between International Training Programs).

Sharing knowledge with partner countries through an integrated online platform would help deepen cooperation and enhance partners' ownership, participation and accountability for their own change processes. Currently, most of the information and knowledge generated for and from project management, results management, contribution management and change management processes lies with Swedish agencies. Sharing information with partner organizations can help build trust, put partners in the driving seat of change, and allow more space for bottom-up ideas and solutions to emerge.

Similar initiatives in Sweden and elsewhere could serve as building blocks for this learning platform. In order to avoid re-inventing the wheel, it was suggested that *Sida and the SPAs should engage in a mapping exercise to identify current initiatives, projects and resources available for SPAs to use in their CapDev work abroad*. HARVARD's Evidence for Policy Design (EPoD) is one such example mentioned. Similarly, SPF's "Beyond Workshop" was mentioned as a useful element for this online platform to help replication and scaling up. Post-workshop follow-up discussion is however important, if not more, to translate new learning into practice.

Another expressed need was an expert resource pool to support SPAs in mobilizing relevant and complementary expertise from Sweden for their CapDev work abroad.

The SPA practitioners suggested that a mapping exercise should be jointly carried out by Sida and the SPAs with the purpose of identifying a list of basic competencies required to engage in CapDev work abroad. The focus should not only be on technical competencies but on functional and cross-functional ones that are essential to support partner countries achieve their SDGs (see some examples in Figure 2). Specific attention should be given to spelling out key core competencies of country-based long-term experts². Example resources that are particularly needed also include methodology, processes, and good practices for working with public administration institutions strengthening in post-conflict and fragile states.

Once these competencies are identified, an expert resource pool can be established with the purpose of supporting SPAs during their fact-finding missions and project implementation. Another option was the establishment of a Help Desk that is available for use by

SPAs to coach their personnel in different subjects and to create a unified picture of what development cooperation and institutional development for achieving Agenda 2030 entail. Some suggested topics where results-based management, organizational change, gender issues, CapDev principles, systems thinking, MSPs, the 2030 Agenda, etc. Once again, emphasis was made on not re-inventing the wheel but complementing and bringing together already existing initiatives, such as SPF's workshops and resources.

Systems thinking competency: the abilities to recognize and understand relationships; to analyse complex systems; to think of how systems are embedded within different domains and different scales; and to deal with uncertainty.

Anticipatory competency: the abilities to understand and evaluate multiple futures – possible, probable and desirable; to create one's own visions for the future; to apply the precautionary principle; to assess the consequences of actions; and to deal with risks and changes.

Normative competency: the abilities to understand and reflect on the norms and values that underlie one's actions; and to negotiate sustainability values, principles, goals, and targets, in a context of conflicts of interests and trade-offs, uncertain knowledge and contradictions.

Strategic competency: the abilities to collectively develop and implement innovative actions that further sustainability at the local level and further afield.

Collaboration competency: the abilities to learn from others; to understand and respect the needs, perspectives and actions of others (empathy); to understand, relate to and be sensitive to others (empathic leadership); to deal with conflicts in a group; and to facilitate collaborative and participatory problem solving.

Critical thinking competency: the ability to question norms, practices and opinions; to reflect on own one's values, perceptions and actions; and to take a position in the sustainability discourse.

Self-awareness competency: the ability to reflect on one's own role in the local community and (global) society; to continually evaluate and further motivate one's actions; and to deal with one's feelings and desires.

Integrated problem-solving competency: the overarching ability to apply different problem-solving frameworks to complex sustainability problems and develop viable, inclusive and equitable solution options that promote sustainable development, integrating the above-mentioned competences.

Figure 2. Key core competencies for achieving SDGs (source: Box 1.1 in UNESCO, 2017. Education for Sustainable Development Goals: Learning Objectives)

² See [SADEV Report 2010:3. Svenska myndigheter som genomforare av Sidafinansierade insatser.](#)

3.2. Strategizing an integrated inter-agency support mechanism for SPAs

3.2.1. The long-term vision

During the co-creation workshop with the SPA practitioners, a long-term vision statement was presented and discussed for strategizing this integrated support mechanism, based on Sida’s new CapDev strategy and SPACAP’s WP1 findings:

“Swedish public agencies have the capacity to engage partners in fostering systems thinking and multi-stakeholder partnership/collaboration in their CapDev work abroad”

No concrete alternative was proposed during the workshop. However, the implications of having this statement as the long-term vision were discussed.

Firstly, *there is a need for reflection around the use of broad terms like “systems thinking” and “capacity development”*. There needs to be a common and clear understanding on what they mean in SPAs’ CapDev practices, beyond the rhetoric. Sida interprets systems thinking as a methodology that includes many different components about how CapDev is structured. In this sense, it is difficult for single agencies to work with systems thinking and MSP alone, given that it is not within their core competency (see Figure 2 and Figure 3). Thus, more support is needed to help SPAs adopt systems thinking in practice.

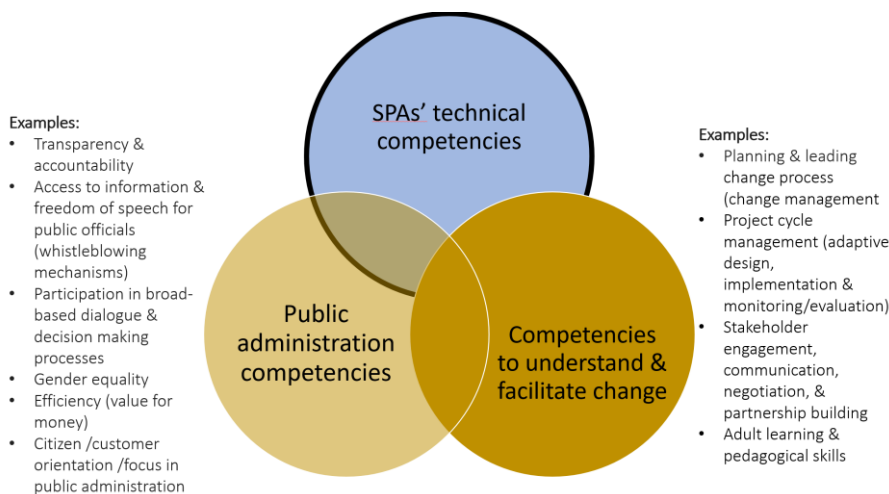


Fig. 3 SPAs core competencies versus other competencies (adapted from N4L’s input to Sida’s annual report 2015)

A second concern relates to the importance of the vision statement to incorporate partners’ perspectives into systems thinking. *Partner organizations should always be at the forefront of determining what kind of capacity strengthening they need to implement in their reform processes.*

3.2.2. How to fulfil the long-term vision?

Several pathways to help fulfil the vision of this integrated support mechanism were discussed and presented by the SPA practitioners. Their ideas center around: a facilitator function, collaborative learning, and systems thinking and multi-stakeholder partnership approaches as the imperative cross-cutting functions in the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable development. Figure 4 illustrates the authors’ interpretation of the integrated inter-agency support mechanism and the inter-related functions and pathways.

As a starting point, the new mechanism is to establish a facilitator function, likened to a “lighthouse” by some practitioners. The actor(s) in charge of this function would have the role of coordinating the stakeholders, processes and actions. It was suggested that Sida could take on this function. It might also be necessary for other agencies with relevant competencies to lead some components as well, since the system could potentially be too complex to manage.

The facilitator(s) would use systems thinking to carry out a holistic analysis of the system’s components, including stakeholders and processes and their interdependencies. This analysis would allow SPAs to have a more holistic understanding of the political, social and economic systems or sub-systems which hold complex capacity problems in place and to identify SDG policy areas where the challenges and possibilities for change and for SPAs support lie. Utilizing systems thinking will also help map out the competencies and needs that exist both in Sweden and abroad, as well as the possibilities to form partnerships. On this topic, *partnerships within Sweden across different sectors*

(government, business, civil society, and academia) could be explored in order to enhance the effectiveness of CapDev efforts through the implementation of long-term multi-stakeholder programs rather than single, short-term projects.

Strengthening cooperation between SPAs could even serve as a catalyst and a good practice to promote collaboration in partner countries between public institutions on common sustainability challenges or policy areas. In this sense, SPAs could carry out stakeholder analyses in the partner countries, to be able to identify collaboration initiatives outside sister-agencies in cases where it is appropriate. In this way, the system components could be identified and help set the boundaries of what issues, actors and change processes that should be included or excluded from the collaborative initiatives.

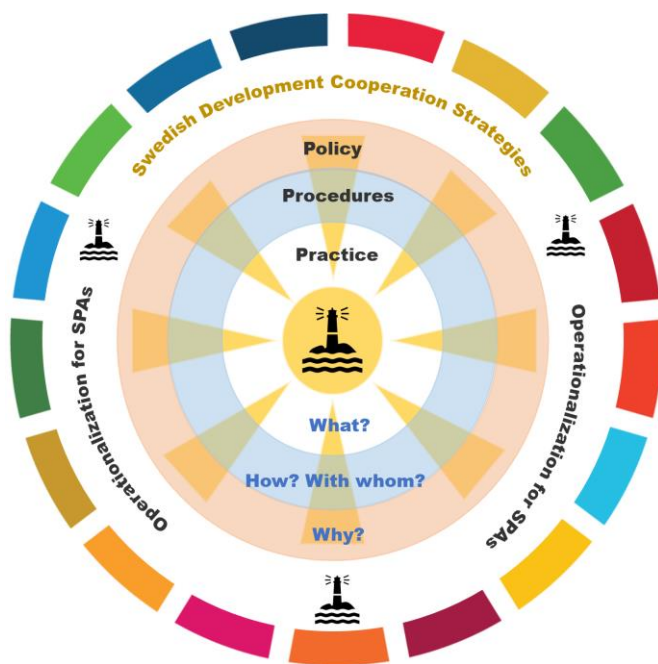


Figure 4. Authors' interpretation of the cross-functions in the integrated support mechanism for SPAs.

Additionally, *based on internal analysis of basic competencies that are required to carry out certain CapDev initiatives, corresponding strategies, methodologies and tools could be mobilized, developed or adapted accordingly.* On this note, there is a need for experts in different thematic areas to improve the effectiveness of current and future initiatives. The facilitator should have access to different types of

expertise to coach the agencies on needs identification, CapDev strategies, and local adaptation. For example, general knowledge in international cooperation, capacity development, change management, project management, adaptive management, and MSP building. Furthermore, SPAs could also identify local and regional experts that are able to provide inside knowledge of the partner countries. Lastly, thematic experts with different backgrounds (civil society, business, academia, etc.) could be considered depending on the needs and the context.

3.2.3. What needs to be in place?

The SPA practitioners acknowledged that *Agenda 2030 should be anchored as an overarching strategy to guide SPAs' CapDev work. This could help create a common and collaborative framing for a Team Sweden approach and align the agencies towards a shared goal.* Additionally, in order to enhance the effectiveness of all CapDev efforts, a common terminology is needed when discussing topics such as CapDev or systems thinking.

Other measures that need to be in place in order to fulfil the long term-vision include clear directives, resources, roles and responsibilities, dialogue and reflection on motivation of SPA engagement in CapDev work abroad, and networks for continuous learning and knowledge sharing. It is important that the MFA, the embassies and/or designated SPA strengthen facilitation and coordination support in partner countries in common policy areas and strategy formulations.

The partnership dialogue approach between SPAs, Sida and the embassies is appreciated and needs to continue for enhancing complementarity. There is a common sense of mutual dependency: with SPAs possess thematic knowledge related to their core-competencies, Sida possesses development cooperation knowledge, and the embassies provide information about a specific partnering context. All actors can use dialogue to learn from each other and improve the efficiency and effectiveness of their CapDev work. Furthermore, *through dialogue, SPAs, Sida, and the embassies can carry out systems analyses both in Sweden and abroad and identify a best-fit where change is needed and ready.* See Figure 3. Similarly, SPA

networks are considered as a key piece of the puzzle. Having networks where SPAs can discuss their experiences and learn from each other is highly valued. When working in the same partner countries, networks can allow agencies to share information about the country and they can facilitate cooperation and coordination between different authorities.

4. SOME CRITICAL REFLECTIONS FROM EXISTING LITERATURE

“We can’t solve problems by using the same kind of thinking that we used to get us into them.”

- Albert Einstein

This section is about some critical reflection from existing literature about systems thinking and multi-stakeholder partnership approaches in development cooperation. It also presents some emerging trends, new thinking and challenges in doing CapDev beyond aid in the context of the SDG era, in general, and in reference to the Sida’s new CapDev strategy.

The achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) rests upon the ability of governments to effectively mobilize and use development resources (United Nations, 2015). Multi-stakeholder engagements or collaborations are believed to be essential vehicles to tackle wicked, complex societal challenges in interconnected governance domains. Through processes of engagement, knowledge exchange, and inter-organizational learning, collaborative efforts can improve synergies between actors and aid in building effective institutions (Moreno-Serna et al., 2020). Furthermore, it is recognized that effective capacity rests not only on individual actors but also on the relations among multiple actors, which also need to be developed (Woodhill, 2010). In recent years, joint or collective impact action as a tool for development cooperation has been increasingly used in policies and strategies.

Despite the recent push in development cooperation towards more unified approaches to capacity development especially towards accelerating

transformational impacts in partner countries, there are considerable knowledge gaps regarding the conditions under which collaborative approaches can materialize into the assumed benefits towards sustainable development (Bodin, 2017; Horan, 2019; van Tulder & Keen, 2018).

Research suggests that although collaborative networks or MSP may be more needed now than ever, they are neither a guarantee of effective results (Bodin, 2017) nor an easy fix of complex societal problems (Bryson et al., 2015). In fact, a recent study compiled by the United Nations Global Compact and Accenture Strategy (2018) reveals that low levels of trust among stakeholders, a lack of partnership building skills and resource constraints are major barriers to MSP. Another earlier study by Pattberg and Widerberg (2016) examining 340 transnational cross-sector partnerships of more than five years after inception following the World Sustainability Summit, also shows a limited track-record in terms of effectiveness. Over 61% of these partnerships are either “inactive, lack any output or fail to match their stated ambition with their observed activities” (Pattberg & Widerberg, 2016: p.44).

Furthermore, several factors have to be considered when setting up collaborative arrangements, such as the degree of institutional complexity of the system, the motivation of actors involved in the partnership and the degree of integration that will be sought (Woodhill, 2010). Failing to unpack these factors may be damaging and can lead to reinforcement of the status quo or an escalation of conflicts between the actors involved (Bodin, 2017).

Sida’s Strategy for capacity development, partnership and methods that support the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development, highlights the importance of broad societal engagement for the achievement of the SDGs (Government Offices of Sweden, 2019). Through this strategy, Sida commits to making use of a broad range of actors and to promote cooperation between them through multi-sector and multi-level partnerships (Government Offices of Sweden, 2019). The aim is to adopt an all-of-government approach to deliver on Sweden’s development cooperation priorities (Government Offices of Sweden, 2019). Furthermore, a

recent study regarding Sida's work with capacity development recommended that Sida adopt a more clustered approach, specifically in regard to the support provided by SPAs (Markensten, 2018). Operationalizing these integrative approaches is not an easy task and it requires the rethinking of the support that is provided to CapDev initiatives. Different clusters have started in recent years between SPAs, for example the program on Partnership for Accountability and Transparency in Cambodia (between Statistics Sweden, the Swedish Tax Agency, the Swedish National Audit Office and the Swedish Parliament's investigation service in collaboration with a local NGO, Transparency International Cambodia). It is important to learn from these and early MSP experiences about why something worked or not.

Within the CapDev Strategy, Sida commits to "work on identifying, developing and supporting partnerships for development cooperation" (Government Offices of Sweden, 2019). As such, Sida positions itself as a possible "partnership broker" who can help Swedish partners in navigating the complexities of building and maintaining collaborative structures for their CapDev work abroad (Moreno-Serra et al., 2020; Hagelsteen & Burke, 2016). As a partnership facilitator, Sida can assist and encourage partners and other stakeholders in unpacking the complexities of the systems in which they work as well as by giving them the space and tools necessary to engage and adapt to dynamic circumstances.

In the context of CapDev work abroad, SPAs have done well where their core competencies are concerned and where the capacity problems of counterparts are predominately technical or change process linear in nature. Despite increasingly broader framing of SPAs CapDev work in recent years, path dependency tends to prevail. The same methods and modalities of engagement are used for technical and policy problems, insensitive to the context. According to Andrews et al (2017), this can still happen not necessarily because of poorly trained CapDev practitioners but rather because the business model of development cooperation as well as national policy making and implementation arena in partner countries has yet to keep pace with systems thinking and broad

based multi-stakeholder approaches. Silo-based, top-down, donor-driven approaches remain predicated on short-term, measurable outputs, not in relevant outcomes and work against systems perspective (OECD, 2019) and accountability for results to the poor and marginalized in partner countries.

In this regard, the implications of institutional complexity associated with adopting MSP approaches needs specific attention. Without a holistic analysis of the power structures, relationship dynamics, the incentives, the tensions and the conflicts that exist within the system (Boesen, 2020), MSPs can fail to bring about sustainable change and even risk exacerbating existing conflicts.

Some clustered approaches, that bring several SPAs together with local government counterparts and NGOs (such as the one previously mentioned in Cambodia, and within the justice sector in Albania), offer excellent learning opportunities for future initiatives by considering why something worked or not for SPAs and the partners involved. Sida has been encouraging systems approach for some time. More can certainly be done to ensure that systems thinking and its approach underpin the entire business model of Swedish development cooperation, contribution management and project management processes, the mindset, work culture, partnership modalities and staff skills.

It is therefore important to recognize that systems thinking is not a magical solution that will solve every problem. In some contexts, simple, technical and even small-scale solutions will be more appropriate. However, the nature of today's sustainability challenges in an increasingly complex and inter-dependent world means that applying systems thinking in SPAs CapDev work will have a better chance to enhance the scale and the depth of the transformational impact (see Figure 5 for a governance assessment framework that promotes an approach that focuses on the inter-relations between international and local stakeholders, governance and accountability involved within a defined system).

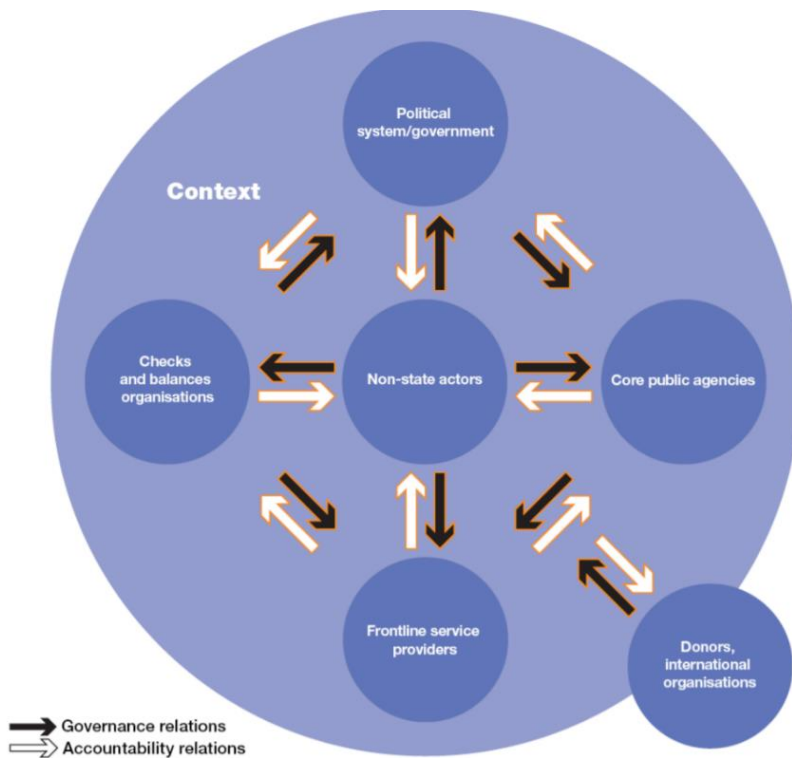


Figure 5: Governance assessment framework (Source: EC 2008; Boesen, 2010)

Additional considerations are necessary:

- Development processes are societal changes. Effective development cooperation is a matter of dealing with technical, governance and political problems (Bossyns & Verle, 2016). Development cooperation, therefore, signifies intervening in complex societal systems. Thus, the discussion around systems thinking is about how to shift from a mechanistic and simplistic cause-effect approach towards a complexity-driven one (Morgan, 2005), in order to have a better chance to enhance the scale and depth of the transformational impact envisaged.
- Systems change due to a single intervention is very unlikely (Janus et al, 2015; Hagelsteen & Becker, 2019). If development cooperation is about poverty reduction, it is therefore important to foster dialogue and negotiations between a broad range of stakeholders that can defend the poor and take equity issues and relational capacities into consideration. This demands time and effort with unpredictable results.

- The business model of development cooperation from project conception to implementation should be compatible or aligned with the principles of systems thinking, complexity and broad-based multi-stakeholder approaches. Literature has shown that a consistent partnership for about 10-12 years should be envisaged to allow results to be monitored and learning to emerge. Even short-term interventions needed to have a long-term perspective in mind and the ambition to work on structural change (Bossyns & Verle, 2016). This way of working calls for a deep understanding of the system (see Figure 5), incremental decision-making, and iterative adaptations.

- What capacities need strengthening, whether for creation, retention or use purposes, of partner organizations and of SPA experts will have to take into account not only technical core competencies but also functional and cross-functional ones (see also Figure 1) to support systems approaches (Hagelsteen & Becker, 2019). The ability of related stakeholders to work together towards a common vision will in fact determine the effectiveness of the chosen intervention (van Tulder, 2018).

The way forward for Capacity Development *beyond aid* seems quite obvious, as Boesen (2015) writes:

However unsettling, is to go with the grain, relinquish the desire to control, and quickly learn and adapt. If that is too difficult an agenda, then the best choice is to leave the job to others who have more freedom to act as fits best.” (p.26)

While this mental shift is important, the perfect should not be the enemy of the good either. Doing everything is not possible given the internal and external constraints. For SPAs committed to contributing to transformative change through their CapDev work abroad, there needs to be conscious and reflective efforts about what they are good at solving what kind of public administrative challenges in what systems (or sub-systems). It is also important to assess where

knowledge/skill/influence gaps exist, whether development of in-house expertise or bringing in external resources/ partners are better investments, and what change can be realistically and incrementally achieved.

In terms of number and financial volume, SPAs play an important role in Swedish development cooperation. There is already a general acceptance among SPA practitioners to adopt systems thinking and MSP approaches in SPAs CapDev work abroad (Sida, 2019). These approaches, if managed and coordinated well, should provide SPAs with additional tools to improve results in the long-term at the societal level and in a sustainable way.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has so far synthesized SPACAP's overall results. It has mapped out possible directions moving forward based on SPA practitioners' inputs from the co-creation workshop. Some critical reflections for

adopting systems thinking and MSP approaches from existing literature were also presented in light of realizing Sweden's commitments towards global implementation of the Agenda 2030.

During the co-creation workshop, participants acknowledged a number of contributions that the SPACAP study has made. First, it facilitated joint reflection on the rationale of SPAs engaging in CapDev work broad. Second, it helped shed light on issues that were previously known but difficult to articulate or explain. Third, it provided a holistic picture of SPAs common strengths, challenges and needs in CapDev practice. The study also presented a strong and consolidated call for further dialogue, coordination, collaboration, and the co-creation of solutions, both among SPAs and between SPAs, Sida and embassies. Lastly, it contributed to the existing body of knowledge and experience about MSP and systems thinking which are at the core of an integrated support mechanism proposed to enhance SPAs CapDev work.

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All our team members are currently engaged in commissioned work for three Swedish public agencies that may be affected by the study. We have disclosed those interests fully to Sida and to the concerned agencies, and have put in place measures in the research processes to mitigate biased views, preconceptions and any other potential conflicts arising from these engagements. Opinions expressed in this paper are solely of the authors and do not reflect the official policy positions of Lund University, the commissioner of the study, Sida, or the Network for Learning member agencies. All rights reserved. No parts of this publication may be reproduced in any form without prior written permission from the authors.

More information on SPACAP study can be found on the website <https://lu.box.com/v/SPACAP2018-2020>.



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