

Sida's model for research capacity building

Analytical capacity and scientific skill are critical features of a sustainable and inclusive society. But how is this best promoted? “*Evaluation of Sida’s Model for Bilateral Research Cooperation*” provides an overall assessment of Sida’s approach in low-income countries.

According to the evaluation, there are strengths and weaknesses of the model and its implementation. The recommendation is to keep the model, but partly refocus it on research groups and networks as the agents of change to reach the larger objective of high quality and relevant research for poverty reduction and development. This would lead to a different dynamic of the bilateral research cooperation (BRC) programmes and further increase sustainability beyond Sida’s support.

Sida welcomes the evaluation’s suggestion to further expand opportunities for research in partner countries, in line with how the model is currently evolving. However, such opportunities depend on the maturity of the research system in each partner country, and the programmes must adapt to the local context. There is a potential conflict in the evaluation’s recommendation to identify and increase support to *change agents* and Sida’s mission to build research capacity primarily in low income countries, where strong research agents are largely missing.

The evaluation has been an important learning process for all participants, benefiting Sida’s work on further developing its methods for research capacity development.

Sida builds capacity for research

Sida’s model builds on a combination of individual and institutional capacity development, where the aim is to strengthen the whole research system. Ingredients in the bilateral programmes are PhD-training in partner countries and in Sweden (the sandwich model) and research support functions at the universities (administration, ICT, libraries, and laboratories). At times there is also support to national research councils and ministries for science and innovation. Sida also supports regional and international research organisations, where the BRC trained researchers may pursue their research, and this support is hence also part of the full system.

According to the evaluation, Sida’s model for bilateral research cooperation is both ambitious in its objectives, long-term in its commitments and generous in its funding. Based on four case study countries (Bolivia, Rwanda, Tanzania and Vietnam), the evaluation concludes that the BRC programmes have reached many of the stated goals in terms of research capacity development (PhD graduates), improved research environments (management and infrastructure), and academic publications. To a degree, the programmes have also contributed to more and better research, research-based policy-making, and improved products and services.

Put more emphasis on conditions for high-quality research

Despite the achievements, Sida’s model does not sufficiently strengthen research of high-quality and relevance to poverty reduction, and there is limited sustainability in terms of funding of the programmes beyond Sida’s engagement. Hence, the evaluation argues, the model has only partially, and to varying degrees, contributed to research capacity development at national, university, and individual levels in partner countries, given the system approach and the logic behind the model.

A challenge is the relatively limited degree to which the supported universities have moved from institutional and individual capacity to the *application* of these capabilities. In particular, there is insufficient room for post-PhD research. There is also limited impact on policy-making as well as limited institutional interaction between the universities and the government, the private sector and civil society organizations, although there are cases of research impact through individual engagement in the public and private sector.

According to the evaluation, there have been improvements in public financing of higher education in partner countries, partly due to the BRC presence. But Sida’s support has influenced national systems of higher education and research to a fairly limited degree. And while the BRC programmes do pay considerable attention to human rights and gender equality, they are less focused on key issues of academic freedom and its implications for the programmes.

Without Sida’s support, institutional support to research at national and university levels will depend on continued support and funding from governments and other donors. Such funding has seen an upward trend but is unpredictable. Governments in the case-study countries are likely to sustain the universities as institutions of higher learning, but their commitment to fund free/critical research is not as obvious. This, according to the evaluation, is partly due to the BRC programmes’ lack of focus on strengthening high quality research,

beyond research training and institutional infrastructure.

Refocus the model on “research as practice”

A well-functioning research environment makes room for individual researchers and research groups to pursue high quality research that benefit society. But universities are bureaucracies, where formal and informal rules determine power structures and conditions for research. These features are difficult for outside actors, such as Sida, to address. Hence, Sida focuses its support on formal institutional structures (administration, infrastructure) plus individual training, and puts less emphasis on agency, or the ‘glue that binds’ those levels together, the evaluation claims.

The evaluation predicts that the individual research capacity, which Sida has contributed to develop, will only partially be used for research activities. This is due to the BRC programme’s inadequate attention to *research as practice* and to research networks, including interaction with Swedish universities.

Yet, compared to four alternative international models for supporting research capacity development, Sida’s model is still the best fit for Sida, given its priorities and mandate, the evaluation states. But efforts should be put into refocusing the model.

The evaluation recommends that Sida’s support to the research system should target specific bottlenecks of relevance for research. Support to basic technical capacity should continue, but the main focus should shift to research leaders and support of a critical mass of individual researchers through PhD training, research groups and research networks, as well as collaborative research of high-quality and relevance. This would strengthen the role of research at the universities.

How Sida benefits from the evaluation

Sida reflects on the evaluation’s some fifteen concrete recommendations in its Management Response (included in the evaluation publication).

The most valuable contribution of the evaluation, in Sida’s view, is its recommendation to increase the focus on research as practice, and its emphasis on the importance of agents of change for the research process. This is in line with how Sida’s model for bilateral research cooperation is currently evolving, concretely through the inclusion of post-doc positions, and competitive research grants in the programmes. It also involves increased support to national funding agencies in partner countries.

But to Sida, the extent to which this expansion of the model is possible and beneficial to the partner country’s research system depends on the maturity of the system. Sida chooses to work with countries where the research capacity is limited. This means that Sida builds capacity through research training and support to the university infrastructure, in collaboration with Swedish universities.

Sida also takes on the recommendation of a flexible approach, where the ingredients of an individual BRC programme depend on the country context.

More short-term support to national research organisations, which the evaluation recommends, should also be considered, as well as simplified monitoring and evaluation of the programmes.

Sida is less convinced by the evaluation’s recommendation to make support to university administration and infrastructure more short-term. To Sida, this support is as fundamental to the system as the research training.

Sida also questions if the evaluation fully appreciates the importance of the local university’s ownership of its research programme, when recommending that the research supported should prioritize themes of global or regional importance and relevance, as well as particular local development challenges, and emphasize multi- or interdisciplinary research. Sida’s view is that the thematic orientation of university research is primarily determined and owned by the partner universities.

The evaluation has been an important learning process for Sida, of great benefit to Sida’s continuous work on exploring methods to support research capacity development in low-income countries.

2021:2 Evaluation of Sida’s Model for Bilateral Research Cooperation

The evaluation was commissioned by Sida. It was carried out by NIRAS and Inge Tvedten (team leader), Arne Tostensen, Adam Pain, Catherine Ngugi, Raphaëlle Bisiaux, Rodrigo Paz, Phanith Chou, and Fredrik Åström (bibliographer) primarily during 2019. The evaluation included field visits to Bolivia, Tanzania and Vietnam. The evaluation can be downloaded from www.sida.se/publications