



Acting Politically Without Calling It Political? Lessons from Sida's Democratisation Evaluation

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A summary of findings by Cecilia Ljungman

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Over the past decade, democratic trajectories in many parts of the world have become increasingly unstable. Periods of political opening have been followed by abrupt reversals, while civic space has narrowed in contexts once considered relatively stable. Against this backdrop, NIRAS, a foundation-owned Nordic consulting company, was commissioned to undertake an [evaluation](#) of Sida's support to democratisation in five countries – Guatemala, Liberia, Moldova, Myanmar, and Tanzania – covering the period 2014–2023.

This article summarises findings from the evaluation with a focus on TWP-relevant insights: where Sida's ways of working align with TWP practices, where they diverge, and what opportunities exist to deepen politically informed programming within a bilateral development agency.

Although Sida does not explicitly frame its work as “thinking and working politically”, the evaluation revealed a pattern that may be of interest to the TWP Community of Practice: Sida often acted in ways that approximate TWP principles, even if it did not define them as such, while also facing clear limitations linked to analytical frameworks.

Understanding the political: partial strengths, persistent gaps

We found that Sida's understanding of political context was generally solid at the descriptive level. Embassy teams possessed deep knowledge of local actors, political history, and entry points for engagement. They often maintained relatively close relationships with partners, and were attuned to shifts in power dynamics.

However, Sida's analytical frameworks did not consistently translate this contextual awareness into structured political analysis. The Multi-Dimensional Poverty Analysis (MDPA), Sida's standard analytical tool, was not designed to assess political drivers, actor incentives, or the configuration of power. As a result, Sida's ability to track autocratisation, state–society tensions, elite bargains, or contested reform coalitions often depended on the knowledge and initiative of individual staff rather than institutional processes.

For TWP practitioners, this is a familiar challenge: informal political intelligence is often strong, but it is not consistently captured, analysed, or used to guide programme design or adaptation.

Acting politically through long-term partnerships

One of the evaluation's clearest findings is that Sida's working relationships often resembled the relational foundations of TWP. In this period, Sida invested in long-term, trust-based partnerships with civil society, independent media, local rights organisations, and, in a smaller number of cases, state institutions. These relationships were not managed as narrow contractual arrangements but as ongoing political dialogues. For many partners, Sida's presence and recognition offered legitimacy, predictability, and protection, particularly in restrictive environments.

Flexible, multi-year funding – including core and programme support – enabled some partners to shape their own political strategies, adapt to context shifts, and strengthen internal governance. This flexibility played a critical role in countries experiencing democratic backsliding, where partners often needed to pivot rapidly from advocacy to protection, from national-level engagement to community-level organising, or from public-facing campaigns to quieter resilience work.

Yet these strengths also come with risks. Long-term partnerships can become institutionally entrenched, potentially limiting support for emerging movements, youth-led initiatives, or organisations outside established networks. From a TWP lens, this highlights how relational capital can both enable and constrain adaptation.

Adaptation under pressure: responding to backsliding

Sida demonstrated considerable flexibility during backsliding or major political ruptures. In Myanmar, Sida reoriented support after the military coup toward civil society. In Tanzania and Guatemala, shifts toward more restrictive political environments likewise prompted adjustments in portfolios and programming approaches towards civil society and UN actors. These actions reflected key TWP principles: recalibrating engagement when political space closes, safeguarding previous gains, protecting local partners, and remaining present during crisis moments.

Coordination: acting politically through alliances

TWP emphasises working through coalitions and networks rather than acting alone. Sweden played an active role in donor coordination on democratisation and earned a reputation for principled commitment, particularly in the areas of human rights and gender equality. At the same time, it was willing to act independently when collaboration risked compromising core values, as seen in Myanmar and Guatemala. In contrast to the other donor countries, Sweden maintained its decision *not* to provide direct support to state institutions in Myanmar even after the 2010 elections (which fell short of international democratic norms) and ceased even indirect support after the coup. In Guatemala during the democratic backsliding years, Sweden became the sole donor voicing concern for human rights and impunity – a stance that placed it in a vulnerable position on several occasions.

In Liberia and Guatemala, a shrinking donor presence made Sweden the second-largest governance donor after the United States, despite its mid-sized financial contributions. Sweden's sustained engagement in each country since their respective civil wars, combined with a consistent stance, led national stakeholders to view Sweden as a key democratic actor whose influence exceeded its financial footprint. This visibility strengthened Sweden's ability to engage politically, but it also heightened exposure and risk when taking principled positions without a broad donor coalition.

Learning systems: an internal constraint on TWP practice

TWP assumes iterative learning and course correction. Yet we found that Sida's learning systems for democratisation have become largely informal and ad hoc. Staff rely on collegial exchange rather than structured reflection, and the use of research, evaluations, and political analysis has declined over time. In a field marked by rapid political change, this weakens the ability to adapt portfolios strategically.

This gap suggests that Sida's strongest TWP-like behaviours occur because of experienced individuals rather than institutional design. To sustain politically informed approaches over time, Sida will need more structured knowledge management, regular democratisation training, and systematic cross-country learning.

Moving from implicit to intentional TWP

Several elements already align with TWP principles: long-term partnerships, flexible funding, contextual knowledge, moral and diplomatic support to rights actors, and willingness to remain engaged during political crises. But without a guiding analytical framework, more agile systems, and stronger internal learning, these practices risk remaining episodic and dependent on individuals.

The evaluation recommends that Sida should further strengthen its ability to engage effectively in complex and dynamic political contexts by thinking and working politically in more systematic and institutionalised ways – in particular recognising and responding to how power, interests, and incentives shape democratisation processes. We also recommend that Sida updates and uses its power analysis guide and / or undertake political economy analysis regularly.

You can explore the full evaluation here:

https://cdn.sida.se/app/uploads/2025/12/03130859/62824_EVA_2_Central-Evaluation_Democratization_webb-1.pdf

About the Author

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About the Thinking and Working Politically Community of Practice

The Thinking and working Politically Community of Practice (TWP CoP) is a global network of practitioners, researchers and policymakers in development and global affairs committed to promoting more effective policy and practice. The TWP CoP works to foster more politically aware approaches to understand how change happens and why, translate findings and implications emerging from political economy analysis into operationally relevant guidance, encourage more flexible and adaptable ways of working, and provide evidence-based insights that can stimulate innovation, sharing and learning in international development and global affairs.

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