

FROM TOP-DOWN TO FLEXIBLE COOPERATION RETHINKING REGIONAL SUPPORT TO AFRICA



From top-down to flexible cooperation: Rethinking regional support to Africa

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COVER PHOTO: Kibera is the largest slum in Nairobi. Thanks to innovative sanitation engineering, the local Kenyan organization Umande Trust has, with support from among others Sida, been able to construct a so called Bio Center in Kibera. Here up to 1,000 visitors per day get help to cope with everyday sanitary requirements and ease the constantly recurrent threats of epidemics. In this picture we see a woman entering the Bio Center in Kibera. Photo by Johan Lindskog, Sida.

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FROM TOP-DOWN TO FLEXIBLE COOPERATION

RETHINKING REGIONAL SUPPORT TO AFRICA

Sweden and many other donor countries focus too strongly on supranational unions and intergovernmental communities in their development support to Africa. More resources should instead go to flexible constellations and networks involving regional actors from both the public and the private sector, as well as civil society. This advice is given by Professor Fredrik Söderbaum and his associates Hanna Skansholm and Therese Brolin.

For many decades, Sweden has supported regional cooperation and regional organisations in Africa. The Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs has been tasked with designing a new Swedish cooperation strategy for regional development cooperation with sub-Saharan Africa, which Sida, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, will be responsible for implementing. This Policy Note discusses four of the most important components of a more effective and sustainable Swedish regional strategy.



This policy note draws on the report *Support to regional cooperation and integration in Africa: What works and why?* (May 2016), commissioned by EBA, the Expert Group for Aid Studies, and written by Fredrik Söderbaum and Therese Brolin.



Less than two percent of the population on Tanzania's countryside have access to electricity, but in this village the corn mill has been electrified thanks to the support of Sida. Connecting villages to the national power grid helps increase the standard of living and decrease the carbon dioxide emissions.



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Get ends and means right

The overall objective of Swedish development co-operation is to ensure that persons living in poverty and under oppression are able to improve their living conditions. There is considerable uncertainty about how this overall objective will be achieved in terms of the overarching goal of Swedish regional strategy, which is “to build capacity and accord among African intergovernmental communities and the countries concerned to manage transboundary challenges.”

Clearly, the Swedish regional strategy strongly emphasises the activities and outputs associated with regional organisations rather than long-term development results. At least to an extent, this uncertainty implies a confusion of ends (development) and means (regional cooperation/regional organisations). In this regard, the Swedish regional strategy in sub-Saharan Africa differs from other Swedish regional strategies. For instance, Swedish strategies for development cooperation with Southeast Asia, the Middle East and North Africa define their objectives in terms

of development results instead of regional cooperation and capacity-building for intergovernmental regional organisations.

“The implementation gap”

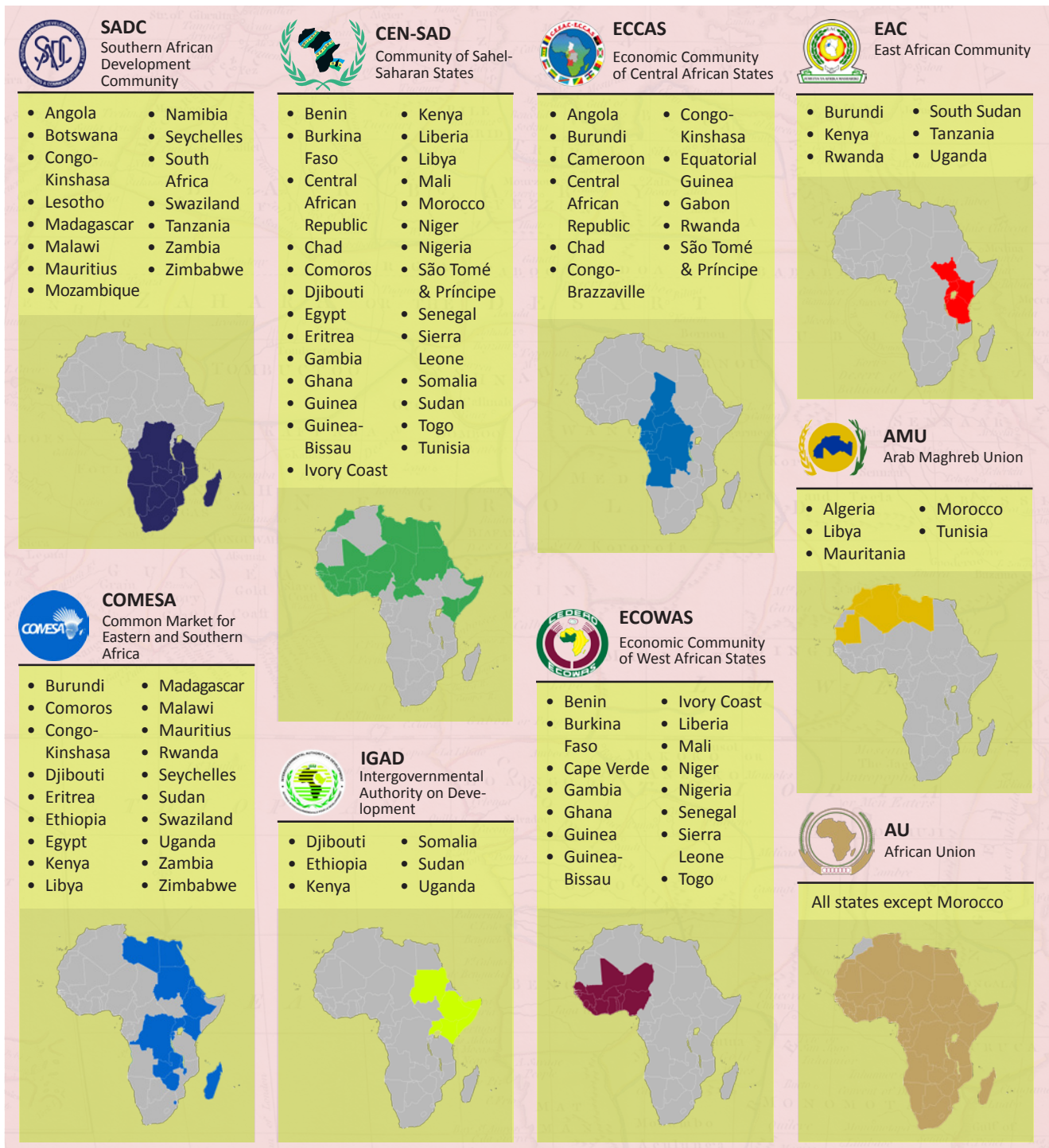
Sweden’s regional strategy strongly stresses direct and indirect support to the African Union (AU) and five of Africa’s regional economic communities (RECs): the East African Community (EAC), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and, to a lesser extent, the Common Market for Eastern and Southern African States (COMESA). An integral part of this strategy is support for “equivalent” and other regional organisations, especially river basin organisations.

There is little doubt that “capacity-building regionalism” may be fruitful when regional organisations are able to contribute to global and regional public goods. Many observers claim that the AU and the RECs are

» A fundamental problem is that many organisations do not function as officially stipulated in the treaties «

performing better today than in the past, at least partly thanks to increased capacity-building. However, a fundamental problem is that many intergovernmental regional organisations in Africa (the AU and the RECs in particular) do not function as officially stipulated in the treaties.

There is considerable empirical evidence that the AU, RECs and many other intergovernmental regional organisations are plagued by wide discrepancies between agreed policies and their implementation, often referred to as “the implementation gap”.



The AU and the RECs. Not counting the African Union (AU), which comprises all African states except Morocco, Africa’s current integration landscape contains an array of intergovernmental cooperation communities and multilateral unions, commonly referred to as RECs, Regional Economic Communities. The eight RECs considered to be the building blocks of the African Economic Community are AMU, CEN-SAD, COMESA, EAC, ECCAS, ECOWAS, IGAD and SADC.



A so called dialogue club meeting in Kabagari, Rwanda. The Institute of Research and Dialogue for Peace created these clubs to help Rwandians confront their dark past and contribute to the reconciliation process.

A need to be more realistic

Research also shows that sometimes top-down regional organisations may be instrumentalised and even manipulated to serve narrow regime interests at the expense of broader national and collective interests. These problems are documented in Sida's own reports, which highlight the lack of competence, work ethic and institutional capacity in the AU and the RECs. Such weaknesses clearly undermine the support enjoyed by these and similar regional organisations. The fundamental problem is that there are still enormous uncertainties regarding the results and development impact of regional capacity-building. There seems to be little awareness in Swedish policy circles that strengthening institutional capacity of dysfunctional organisations runs the risk of squandering resources.

As a result of these and similar problems, there is a need to be more realistic about the positive and negative effects of various types of regional organisation and to identify which regional frameworks to support in a given situation. Selecting appropriate recipients and successfully implementing strategies requires a deep knowledge of the context and regional political economy.

Another problem with the AU and the RECs is the marginalisation of market and civil society actors in many of these organisations. The Swedish focus on state-actors does not sit well with the overall intention of Swedish bilateral support to Africa, which often prioritises participation by market and society actors. A more diversified approach is needed that acknowledges the inclusion and participation of the private sector and civil society in regional development cooperation. To a large extent this requires a focus on institutional solutions and implementation partners more flexible than top-down RECs.

A more flexible approach

For more than 15 years, Swedish donor officials have discussed the link between bilateral national assistance and regional development assistance. Even though the strategy clearly states that regional and national support are interdependent, in the implementation of Swedish development cooperation these forms of support continue to be delinked and sometimes even isolated from one another. This disjuncture is strongly stressed in several evaluations in the field, and was also corroborated in our interviews with Swedish field officials.

There are several reasons for the problematic relationship between Swedish national and regional development assistance. One is the organisational and administrative challenges of linking these different forms of support. However, the problem is exacerbated by the strong focus of Swedish regional support on the regional “level” and regional “value-added,” in particular on building the capacity of African regional intergovernmental communities. In contrast with Sweden’s top-down approach, other donors rely on a bottom-up approach whereby they also seek to promote regional development through national strategies and programmes. Our suggestion is not to replace a top-down with a bottom-up strategy, but to adopt a flexible approach, which in various ways systematically synchronises national and regional support and at the same time involves private market and civil society actors. Support for multilateral mechanisms engaged in regional cooperation/development should also be integrated into such a framework.

Interestingly, Sweden employs such a multi-level approach in its regional strategy for HIV/AIDS and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) in Southern Africa. This strategy emphasises collaboration with multilateral organisations (e.g., UNAIDS), regional actors and organisations as well as state and non-state actors at the national level. Almost all our interviewees at Sida headquarters and in the Ministry for Foreign Affairs referred to the success of this three-tiered approach. It is puzzling that Sweden has adopted two completely different approaches to regional development assistance. The argument here is that the multi-level approach is better at addressing the detrimental gaps between national, regional and multilateral development assistance.

Take a lead in regional donor coordination

It is widely recognised that donor coordination is crucial to aid effectiveness. However, coordination of

regional development assistance is weak compared to national development assistance. In practice, many donors support numerous regional projects in the same region, without adequate, organised or systematic coordination among them.

It needs to be recognised that donor coordination of regional programmes is challenging, not least due to their complexity, but also because donor offices responsible for regional cooperation tend to be distributed in different localities around Africa.

There is a trend towards increased Swedish involvement in donor coordination, and there is an opportunity for Sweden to play a more active role in facilitating donor coordination. Sweden has the skills and comparative advantage to play a leading role in strategic coordination in specific policy fields, such as health, climate and transboundary water management, and regional economic development and infrastructure.

Recommendations | to policy-makers

- Replace the focus on regional capacity-building and the outputs of regional organisations with a focus on long-term development and poverty reduction through regional development cooperation;
- Venture beyond the exaggerated focus on politicised regional organisations such as the AU and RECs in favour of more multidimensional regional support that involves state and non-state actors in more flexible and functional organisations and networks;
- Synchronise regional and national development assistance; and
- Strengthen Sweden’s role in donor coordination for regional programmes.

Photo by Per-Ulf Nilsson, Sida.



In a modest shack in Addis Ababa, a group of 55 women run a laundry, thanks to a project organised by the local organisation Beza with financial support from Sida.



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