



## Exit and sustainability of Swiss developmental cooperation Ex-post analysis of 14 projects in South Africa and India

### Key facts

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Switzerland has been actively engaged in international development cooperation for decades. This cooperation takes place within the framework of bilateral and multilateral commitments in selected countries. The federal funds made available for this purpose totalled approximately 2.8 billion Swiss francs in 2012. With a budget of 1.65 billion Swiss francs, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) accounted for most of this amount. The SDC is the international cooperation agency of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs.

The primary objective of the present evaluation was to examine the current development state of former SDC supported projects on the basis of a selection of 14 projects in South Africa and India completed many years ago. In the process, the development of the completed projects and the achievement of their objectives were traced back, taking particular account of Switzerland's exit scenarios as donor country. Moreover, the current situation was assessed through onsite visits.

#### **Investigating sustainable aspects of development cooperation is complex**

For many years now, international development cooperation has been advocating the long-term continuation of benefits and effects achieved by a programme or project, also after its completion. Consequently, ex-post evaluations are becoming increasingly important for assessing the sustainability of effects. However, only few studies taking place years after a project has ended or the donor country has withdrawn its supports, have been conducted so far. This is mainly because the measurement of sustainable aspects still remains a complex and difficult undertaking.

Against this backdrop, the sustainability results of this study need to be apprehended with above limitation in mind. These results are primarily assessments by the people interviewed and by the project team, based on the limited snapshots gained during the onsite visits.

#### **Measuring the goal achievement in development cooperation has many limitations**

Many objectives of the projects examined were formulated in a very general manner and frequently relevant target values and parameters were missing. Therefore a precise examination of the objectives achievement based on the available project documentation and interviewees' statements was difficult. Thus, the judgments in this study rely heavily on interpretations. To complicate matters further, many objectives cannot be clearly classified in terms of their definition and formulation. It is unclear, whether they are output, outcome or impact objectives. As the name indicates, output objectives refer to verifiable results of activities or project achievements. Outcome objectives refer to direct effects on the target groups, while impact goals generally seek to achieve broader effects in the long run. The latter objectives in particular, which are of strategic and long-term nature, are generally difficult to achieve. Their measurement also requires much effort and frequently identified effects can only be partially linked back to the project measures. An additional difficulty arises through the fact that the relevance of these different objectives varies across projects. Adequate indicators and monitoring systems that provide essential data and information are still not used systematically.

According to the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (2005), to ensure best possible effects, project objectives should be clearly defined, operationalized and have concrete target values that

allow their measurement. The SFAO supports these requirements, as effectiveness and sustainability are becoming increasingly important as key success factors for development cooperation projects and programmes.

### **Numerous “project footprints” can still be found years after their completion**

It can generally be noted that, at present, numerous “footprints” could still be found in all of the projects audited. These take different forms, however, in terms of quality and quantity. They are dependent on the project’s nature and objectives and therefore can be observed and grasped more or less directly. Particularly objectives associated with the direct financial support of an organisation and its activities can be considered as mostly achieved. All supported organisations in the projects examined still exist today and remain active in the core areas supported at the time (institutional sustainability). Only partially achieved were objectives, which focussed on a project and its influence on the target groups and therefore are distinct from aforementioned objectives, which targeted an organisation. In most cases there were several stakeholders or target groups involved. When the project ends these groups are primarily responsible to ensure the successful continuation of the previously supported activity on their own.

The SFAO's findings show in general that the current situations of the projects audited have developed in various expected and a few unexpected directions. Furthermore, some desired developments could only be achieved with major delays. No final judgment can be made on the further continuation of the former projects.

### **The SDC withdrew from projects in a correct manner**

As a preliminary remark, it should be emphasised that the key trigger for Switzerland's exit from projects in South Africa and India was a fundamental change of orientation regarding the SDC's development cooperation strategy.

In the case of the projects audited, Switzerland's exit was not abrupt; it generally took place in several stages. The vast majority of interviewees described Switzerland's exit as exemplary and pleasant. Not only were all of those involved informed early on, help was also provided where needed to facilitate the optimal continuation of the former projects. This sows the good partnerships, which was frequently established already from the beginning, between Switzerland and the institutions or persons involved in the recipient countries.

Therefore to this day, Switzerland has a good reputation in both countries where the projects took place. Even in the absence of auditable comparative figures, it can nevertheless be stated that not only during a project or programme, but years later Switzerland is still considered to be a cooperative and competent donor and partner.

### **The exit of a key donor is important for sustainable continuation**

The SFAO also looked into how and to what extent possible success factors or risks for the former project’s continuation were taken into account and addressed in a targeted manner. The results varied significantly depending on the project in question. During Switzerland's exit, the analysis of possible factors for success or failure was discussed in varying detail across the projects. There are no consistent and binding guidelines at the SDC for the risk analysis or project exit.

Particularly in bilateral projects with only one or a few donors, there is a heightened risk of a break in continuity when a key donor withdraws. With its exit, the project does not only lose a major

source of revenue, but also the donor's valuable support. In most cases, the commitment of other stakeholders towards the shared project is put into question too.

A donor country's exit can thus fundamentally change the situation with major consequences for the former project's long-term continuation. Consequently, sufficient attention has to be paid right from the start to aspects of project completion, exit and continuation. Otherwise, the efforts of a longstanding cooperation and the hard worked for results can be jeopardized instantly.

### **Examined projects were needed and innovative, but associated with risks**

The SDC's engagement in both countries had various specific characteristics. Almost all projects showed a significant need for support at the beginning. Many projects were launched in "niche areas", i.e. support was given to organisations or projects, which were more or less "off the beaten track" for other development aid organisations and in areas, where few other donors were active. Moreover, some projects showed significant innovative potential, which was repeatedly confirmed by the interviewees.

As Switzerland's development cooperation mainly supported smaller projects with an average total funding of 3 to 5 million Swiss francs, they were limited in their scope regarding impact and sustainability. It is rather difficult for projects of that sort of size to achieve substantial, sustainable and broadly anchored improvements. Of course that does not exclude the possibility that primarily at local or regional levels various positive and long-term effects can be achieved. However, with the approach adopted by the SDC sustainable effects on a supra-regional or national level are likely to be more difficult to achieve. Furthermore, SDC's "niche aid policy" did not always stipulate for direct and active involvement of competent local actors, such as central government offices. While SDC supported projects are mostly welcomed by the local government from the start or during the project, this does not ensure that local players will possibly take over project activities or show continued support to them after the project has ended.

### **Project documentation is a key source of information for evaluating lessons learned**

In the case of this audit, the SFAO's key source of information was SDC's internal document management system. The documents showed that the state of available project information varied greatly. While some project documentation was comprehensive, only basic documentation existed for others. In some cases, further documents had to be sought in the competent coordination offices in South Africa and India. At times this required much effort. But these documents provided much valuable information for understanding the project and the project objectives in question.

In SFAO's opinion, a comprehensive and centrally filed project documentation is needed, as such documentation constitutes a relevant information source for the various aspects of a project, such as objectives achievement and risk factors. Last but not least, this information can provide the basis for learning processes or for developing good practice guidelines for future projects.

### **Risk assessment is a key to success for the implementation and continuation of projects**

Similar to the heterogeneous documentation mentioned above, the risk assessments (identification of potential project risks) vary considerably in terms of quantity and quality. While good risk assessments existed for some projects and/or for the context, such data is missing almost entirely for other projects. However, it is precisely this information that can point to potential pitfalls in the project's implementation and goal achievement and can help determine the long-term project success or failure early on.

Consequently in SFAO's opinion, systematic and uniform risk analyses prepared within the framework of project planning can provide useful initial pointers for the best possible implementation and continuation of projects. If necessary, these have to be adapted to prevailing developments during project implementation.

### **Targeted ex-post analyses can create added value**

Against the backdrop of the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, corresponding adjustments to existing evaluation practices need to be considered. To "profit from results and lessons learned from selected completed projects", targeted ex-post analyses a few years after project completion provide valuable insights for future project development, implementation and, particularly exit, as well as for the continuation of project concepts and objectives. These ex-post analyses should be conducted onsite by independent persons or organisations. In this way, more reliable success factors for effective and sustainable projects can be identified and specifically promoted in SDC project staff training.

### **Recommendations for the SDC**

The SFAO's recommendations for the SDC primarily concern the management of projects in regards to optimal withdrawal and long-term continuation of the benefits and effects of development aid projects and for the phase after project completion:

- Define internal guidelines for the project completion
- Improve the definition of objectives in terms of measurability of progress towards their achievement
- Ensure active and consistent project documentation
- Systematically monitor key risk areas within projects
- Encourage ex-post analyses for selected key projects.

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