



WORKING PAPER AUGUST 2014
POVERTY FOCUS IN SELECTED SWEDISH AID PORTFOLIOS

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Introduction

The aim of Swedish international development assistance is to help reduce poverty. Since 2013 its overall objective is to "create preconditions for better living conditions for people living in poverty and under oppression" (Swedish government, 2014, p 13). Already from the beginning, some 50 years ago, Swedish official aid has been focused on poverty reduction. All previous formulations of the overall objective – in 1962, 1968, 1978 and in 2003 – have been focused on poverty reduction (Odén, 2013).

The purpose of this paper is to assess whether projects and programmes in a selected number of Swedish partner countries focus on what research have found to be effective poverty reducing interventions. To what extent are Swedish aid interventions in practice geared towards reducing poverty? Does Sweden support policies and practices that are effective at tackling poverty?

These questions may be analysed at various levels. Our focus is limited to Swedish bilateral aid in a select sample of countries. Furthermore, we will not discuss the quality or the effects of interventions or judge the output, outcome or impact of Swedish aid. The discussion is restricted to *whether the relevant kinds of interventions to reduce poverty have been chosen or not*.

Other aspects of the wider question of poverty focus are discussed elsewhere. For instance, Baulch (2014) investigates to what extent Swedish bilateral aid is channelled towards poor countries, and towards countries where the rate of poverty is high. He finds that Swedish aid is reasonably well focused when it comes to the selection of countries, even though other donors, such as Denmark and the UK, are even more poverty focused in their bilateral aid. A main reason for this is Sweden's support to relatively less poor countries in Central and Eastern Europe. On the other hand the US, whose aid allocations are driven by a number of other motives in addition to poverty reduction, is clearly less poverty focused than Sweden.

In 2007, the Swedish government decided to limit the number of its core development cooperation partner countries. As one part of this process new categories for the classification of countries were established. These categories may be interpreted as expressions of various motives for Swedish development cooperation.¹ One group of countries were chosen since they are undertaking reforms aiming at membership in the European Union. Others were chosen because their political system is especially oppressive, and in need of democratic openings. Some were chosen because they recently have come out of conflict. Others still were chosen because Sweden aims at long term collaboration in terms of poverty reduction.

This latter category, consisting of 12 countries, has been selected for study in this paper. We assume the Swedish poverty profile to be stronger and more visible in these countries, compared to other country categories. Should a strong poverty focus not be found in these country portfolios, it is not likely to be found elsewhere either. Hence, to what extent is Swedish aid within these 12 countries supporting interventions that have been found effective at reducing poverty?

¹ Kron (2012) argues convincingly that existing cooperation between political organisations in partner countries and organisations belonging to one of the four parties in the Swedish government was the main explanatory factor behind the choice of the 33 Swedish partner countries. It is rather the subdivision of the 33 into categories that have been motivated this way.

The complexity of the matter

Answers to such questions are hard to arrive at. There are several layers of normative judgements involved. The evaluative norm against which we assess Swedish aid programs – interventions that are judged to “work” in poverty reduction – constitutes a first layer of uncertainty. How should a consensus view on relevant research findings be summarized and formulated? Another sensitive layer is the classification of various aid interventions into categories of activities or policies. Could an intervention labelled “climate change adaptation” possibly also be a “pro-poor growth” intervention?² Can a “savings scheme” act as insurance against shocks, smoothing consumption, while at the same time be growth enhancing? These are just a few examples where labelling can be more concealing than illuminating.

One recent attempt at indirectly describing the poverty profile of Swedish bilateral aid interventions was made by the consulting firm Indevelop (Christoplos et al, 2013). They analysed 71 of the evaluations their company had made of Swedish aid interventions over the last two years (April 2011 - April 2013).³ They found that evaluated interventions largely lacked poverty focus, and also that evaluations of these interventions seldom discussed poverty reduction aspects. A mere 30 percent of the evaluated interventions had poverty reduction as part of their programme objectives. Positive results for poor people were identified only in 15 percent of the interventions. And four out of ten evaluations did not assess the poverty focus or the perspective of the poor in the interventions studied (Ibid, p 46f).

However, as the authors admit themselves, their results are biased. What interventions are being evaluated in the first place? It may be assumed that evaluations are undertaken in order to assess particular methods of intervention or particular themes that may be in current sway, rather than with the purpose of mapping the overall Swedish poverty focus. Their sample is also biased towards countries in Central and Eastern Europe, a region where the poverty focus of Swedish bilateral aid was especially weak. So, while the conclusions by Christoplos et al (2013) provide indications of a possible neglect of poverty focus in Swedish bilateral aid, we need other methods in order to say anything more firmly about the issue.

Despite difficulties described above, we will classify the aid portfolios for 12 Swedish partner countries according to one specific interpretation of what effective policies for poverty reduction are. In order for this to promote a constructive discussion it is important to carefully describe the various steps of the method used.

² “Pro-poor growth” is economic growth that benefits the poor. The concept may refer either to situations where the incomes of poor people increase in absolute terms, or to situations where incomes of the poor grow faster than incomes of the population as a whole (DfID, 2004). The key point is that economic growth needs to be inclusive, result in employment creation and in other ways benefit people experiencing poverty.

³ During this period, Indevelop has been selected as number one in the procurement process, implying that all offers of conducting evaluations are given to them. When Indevelop declines such an offer, consulting firm number two gets the offer.

Methodology

Poverty can be described as an absence of certain capabilities or as a condition where key means for human wellbeing are lacking. When individuals or households do not have enough resources or abilities to meet their needs today, they live in poverty. There is no international consensus on how to measure poverty. The ideal would be to describe and measure poverty in its many dimensions (Alkire and Foster, 2008) and as a dynamic phenomenon (Kanbur and Schaffer, 2005). However, for the sake of simplicity we will in the following refer to poverty in monetary terms. This is a common practice and in line with the literature we will draw on in this paper. “Extreme poverty” is a situation where people are living on less than USD 1,25/ day (PPP), and “moderate poverty” a situation where people live on USD 1,25 – USD 2/day (PPP).⁴

To assess the poverty focus of Swedish aid portfolios, a scheme over policies that are effective at reducing poverty has been created. This scheme is mainly built from the analysis and conclusions made in the Chronic Poverty Report 2014-2015 (Shepherd et al, 2014). Additional analytical support for this scheme has been found in a synthesis report from the ReCom project run by UNU-Wider (ReCom, 2014). Hence, the scheme aims to represent a research consensus on what policies are effective at reducing poverty.

The Chronic Poverty Report 2014-2015 (CPR) structures effective poverty reducing policies into three different layers;

- Progressive social change;
- Policy areas that are poverty reducing across the board; and
- More specific and contextual policies that deal with each of three processes in the poverty “tripod”; tackling extreme poverty, stopping impoverishment and sustaining poverty escapes.

As a basis, governments need to pursue a process of progressive social change. Poverty has many dimensions. Hence, deep-rooted social change is needed to *simultaneously* tackle issues of access to markets, to productive resources (such as land and water), to education and health for the poor while paving the way for their voices to be heard. There is need for governments, in collaboration with business and civil society, to drive towards reduced inequalities, inclusion and social contracts.

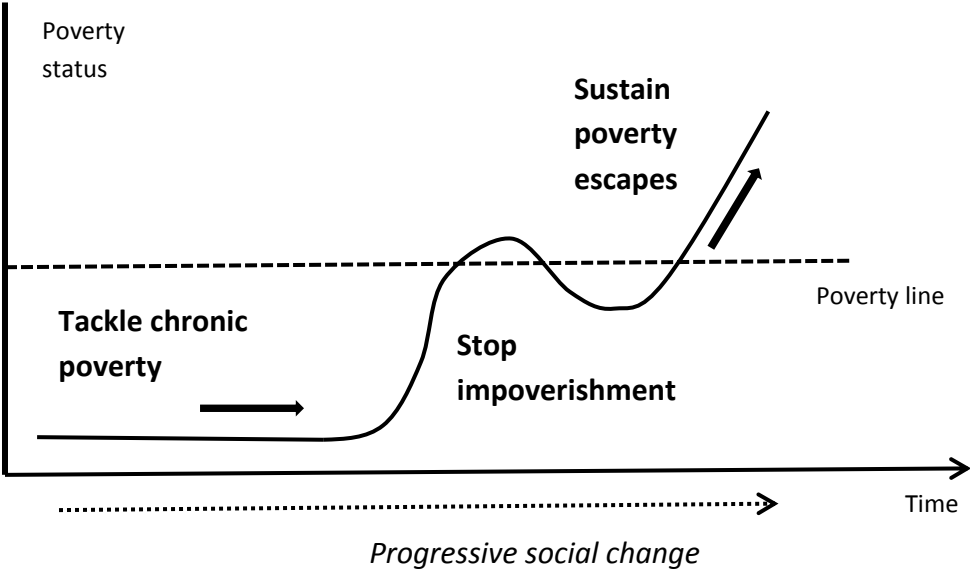
But even with limited or without transformative change, some policies help reduce poverty. Broad education programs, social protection programs and “pro-poorest growth” are helpful across the board, regardless of the character of poverty. Education and the knowledge, capability and self-esteem it brings, are assets people bring with them everywhere. Social assistance and protection provides the safety net that enables people living in poverty to take the risks and make the investments that help them move out of poverty. Pro-poorest growth makes markets, jobs and incomes available on increasingly decent terms for groups that hitherto have been excluded.

However, the most important part of the message from CPR is that policies need to tackle three separate poverty processes simultaneously. The report calls this the poverty “tripod”. The tripod consists of policies that are contextual, adapted to specific situations, but that need to be pursued

⁴ “Severe poverty” is a condition where people live on less than USD 0,70 /day (PPP) and “chronic poverty” is a situation where extreme poverty persists over many years, lifetimes or even intergenerationally.

together. A first set of policies is needed to lift people above the poverty line (USD 1,25 /day). Another set of policies is needed to hinder them from falling back below the line. Yet a third set of policies is needed to support people in moving further away from the poverty line, while they steadily become more resilient.

Figure 1



Key elements of poverty reduction can be structured as in figure 1, building on the messages from the CPR. This illustrates a thought evolution over time, where people lift themselves above the poverty line (USD 1,25 /day), avoid falling back below it and then move further away from the poverty line. In real life these three processes are happening simultaneously, affecting different groups of people. The key point is that the three sets of policies that support the movements in the poverty “tripod” need to be undertaken together and simultaneously. Otherwise, success in one of the three processes will be offset by setback in one of the other.

The primary responsibility for the policies that will be described in the following rests with governments. Governments have to collaborate with business and civil society organisations in their domestic settings. Poverty reduction is thus a responsibility for societies and states in countries where poverty resides. However, especially in the poorer countries there are roles for external donors and partners to contribute to the fulfilment of these policies. Our analysis takes these assumptions as a starting point.

The analysis will proceed stepwise. Assessments of how Swedish bilateral aid programs tackles issues of progressive social change will be followed by assessments of how well they target the three broad policy areas that are effective across the board.

However, given specific situations and the poverty tripod that the CPR describes, more specific policies and policy combinations are also needed. To tackle extreme poverty there is need for an inclusive national development plan. This is needed to make education, social protection and pro-poor growth effective also in tackling extreme poverty. Effective political voice for the poorest,

changing such social norms that maintain poverty and marginalization, making sure agricultural value chains benefit small-holders are examples of areas that may invoke the additional focus that is needed to tackle extreme poverty.

To stop impoverishment, a fundamental need is to deal with shocks that risk pulling people down into poverty. Since illness is a common reason for falling into poverty, universal health care is key, as are various insurance schemes and saving mechanisms that may compensate for losses of key assets. Violent conflicts and environmental disasters are other reasons why people fall into poverty.

Policies that help sustain movements out of poverty centre around the building and strengthening of resilience. Post-primary education, improved access to productive assets such as land and improved access to key markets are examples of factors that help people diversify their economy and start building up resources.

Given the need for these more contextualised interventions, the analysis will assess to what extent Swedish aid portfolios target such somewhat more specific policies. The following scheme will be used for that purpose:

Figure 2

Tackling extreme poverty				Ending impoverishment				Staying out of poverty			
<i>Better quality basic education</i>	<i>Social assistance</i>	<i>Pro-poor growth</i>	<i>Affirmative action, anti-discrimin.</i>	<i>Universal health care</i>	<i>savings & insurance</i>	<i>disaster risk mgmt</i>	<i>Prevent conflict</i>	<i>Assets, land policies, mobility</i>	<i>Skills training, labor market links</i>	<i>social protection</i>	<i>Universal SRHR</i>

Choice of countries

Swedish bilateral development aid is given to a large number of countries, when all different aid channels are taken into consideration. As mentioned above, the decision in 2007 to better focus the bilateral Swedish aid resulted in 33 countries being specially selected. Out of these, 12 were selected with the motivation that Sweden should pursue long term development collaboration. The 12 countries are Bangladesh, Bolivia, Burkina Faso, Cambodia, Ethiopia, Kenya, Mali, Mozambique, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia. Among these, Burkina Faso will be phased out as a Swedish partner country by the end of 2016. Myanmar will instead enter the group. However, since this shift has not yet taken place, the original country constellation has been kept for this analysis. These 12 countries have belonged to this long-term category since the decision in 2007. For practical reasons the analysis has been limited to two years (2012 and 2013). The reason we choose to study these countries is that we are more likely to find a high poverty focus in this country category than in any other category.

All interventions during 2012 and 2013 with a cost higher than 100 000 SEK have been scrutinized. The number of scrutinized interventions lies in the range of 40 to 60 per country and per year. Time has not allowed for in-depth scrutiny of all the individual projects. However, the number of interventions to scrutinize has been reduced by the fact that many of the interventions remained the same both in 2012 and 2013. The study has furthermore focused on the character of the intervention

– what it is that actually is done – rather than the effectiveness or efficiency of the intervention. Information about the character of interventions has been found in project documents and descriptions of organizations, both of which are readily available on the Internet. The site www.openaid.se and documents available on that site have been widely used, but complemented with other documentation of the interventions financed by Swedish bilateral aid.

The interventions have been assessed by the character of their main activities, rather than by any labels that may have been used to portray the work. For instance, interventions labelled as “climate change adaption” may very well have been classified as securing land or other assets – if this is what activities perform. Likewise, interventions labelled as “pro-poor” may have been assessed as something else, if activities have not been in line with what the CPR refers to as “pro-poorest growth” interventions. It is the equivalence between on one hand what the CPR refers to as effective policies, and which are captured under the headings in the scheme above, and on the other hand the interventions undertaken that has been assessed.

Interventions have furthermore been assessed in terms of intensity or degree. This is indicated with up to three pluses:

- + Refers to interventions under 10 MSEK;
- ++ Refers to interventions between 10 to 30 MSEK and a mid-range coverage thematically and population wise;
- +++ Refers to interventions above 30 MSEK, if they also have general coverage thematically and population wise within their policy field.

It is thus not sufficient to get “++” or “+++” for a costly intervention if it is at the same time marginal within the specific policy field. It also needs to have some broader relevance to acquire those higher labels.

Results

The 12 countries in the sample are all low income countries, with the exception of Bolivia and Zambia, who belong to the lower middle income category. The poverty incidence, as well as the poverty depth, differs quite substantially between them. This is obvious from the following table, where they are ranked according to the headcount share of the population living under the international poverty line of USD 1,25/ day, as measured in purchasing power parity (PPP 2005)⁵. The table also indicates the tendency of change in the national poverty headcount in each country.

⁵ This is the last year available for prices in various countries adjusted to show their respective Purchasing Power Parity (PPP).

Table 1

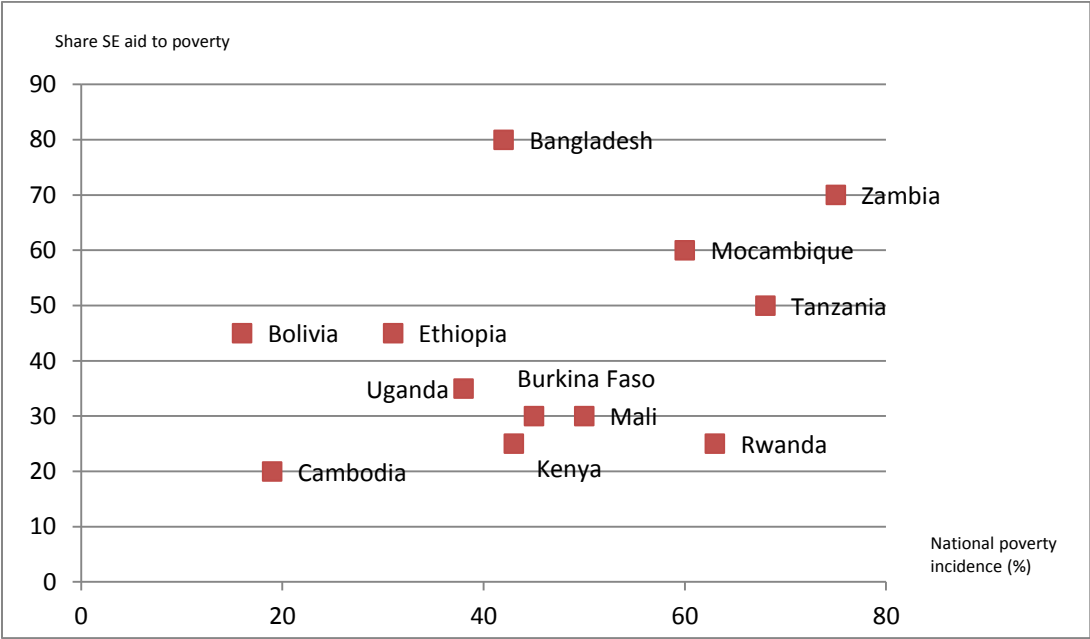
	Headcount poverty USD 1.25/day, 2005 PPP (% of pop) <i>(measurement year)</i>	Poverty gap, 1,25 USD/day, 2005 PPP (% of pop)	Poverty trend over last decade	Aproximate share of Swedish ODA to poverty reduction measures (%)
Zambia	74,5 (2010)	41,9 (2010)	On the rise	70
Tanzania	67,9 (2007)	28,1 (2007)	Mild decrease	50
Rwanda	63,2 (2011)	26,7 (2011)	Mild decrease	20 - 25
Mocambique	59,6 (2008)	25,1 (2008)	Sharp decrease	60
Mali	50,4 (2010)	16,4 (2010)	Mild decrease	20 - 30
Burkina Faso	44,6 (2009)	14,7 (2009)	Continuous (?)	25 - 30
Kenya	43,4 (2005)	16,9 (2005)	On the rise (?)	20 - 25
Bangladesh	43,2 (2010)	11,2 (2010)	Steady decrease	80
Uganda	38,0 (2009)	12,2 (2009)	Steady decrease	35
Ethiopia	30,7 (2011)	8,19 (2011)	Sharp decrease	40 - 45
Cambodia	18,6 (2009)	3,51 (2009)	Sharp decrease	20
Bolivia	15,6 (2008)	8,64 (2008)	Mild decrease	35

Sources: World Development Indicators (accessed 2014-06-25) and www.openaid.se, accessed June and August 2014.

In the right-hand column of table 1 the approximate shares of Swedish aid channelled towards interventions directly relevant for poverty reduction are shown. These shares constitute the sum of those interventions that we in table 2 mark as relevant for any of the three poverty reducing processes. We note an allocation pattern that in the four most poverty stricken countries seem somewhat correlated with the severity of poverty – with the exception of Rwanda. However, for countries with headcount poverty rates from 50 percent downwards, it is difficult to discern any clear allocation pattern. For instance, in Kenya, with 43 percent living under the poverty threshold and poverty incidences on the rise, around 25 percent of the aid portfolio goes to effective poverty reduction activities. In Bangladesh with similar poverty shares, but poverty incidences falling, 80 percent of aid is channelled to activities deemed to be effective at reducing poverty.

The dispersed nature of the allocation in relation to poverty incidences are more clearly shown in the following graph:

Figure 3 Swedish aid allocations to poverty reduction



Source: Own calculations. Shares of Swedish aid allocations (Y-axis, percentages) compared to incidence of extreme poverty (X-axis, percentages of population under 1,25 USD/day) in 12 partner countries.

What is obvious from Figure 3 is that countries with relatively similar levels of poverty incidence, for instance in the spans 40-50 or 60-70 percent of the population living under the poverty line, receive very different shares of poverty-focused interventions within Swedish bilateral aid portfolios.

Still, substantive shares of the Swedish bilateral aid go to interventions that are effective at reducing poverty. Development processes are complex, complicated and long term endeavours. There are needs to be filled on many levels. Interventions may be important, relevant and needed even if they only indirectly contribute to poverty reduction. For instance investments in infrastructure, research or better government quality may not always be directly relevant for poverty reduction. Such investments may still constitute preconditions for activities that are more directly relevant for poverty reduction.

However, an observation is that those poverty reducing policies we point to here have not constituted the dominating allocation criteria for Swedish aid to all of the 12 countries studied. In some of the countries they seem to have been, at least partly. But this has not been the case nor for the group as a whole, nor for most of the countries in the group.

Progressive social change

As argued above, for poverty reducing policies to be effective there is a need for a country’s government to pursue a general process of progressive social change. Without this, policies run the risk of being undertaken in isolation and not pursued with enough consistency.

Our scrutiny shows that Sweden has in its bilateral aid programs to the 12 countries placed heavy emphasis on support to democracy and human rights. Between 10 to 60 percent of financial resources have been channelled towards these programmes in these countries (median 30 and average 31 percent). Not all of this can be said to directly strengthen forces of progressive change. However, support to civil society and democratic agents would in many cases do this. In most of the 12 countries support to such interventions are at least as substantive as the support given to any of the separate intervention types that were listed in table 3. Hence, a strong component in the Swedish support to poverty reduction is the support given to strengthen forces and actors that aim at progressive social change.

To what extent have then the three overriding policy areas for poverty reduction been part of Swedish aid portfolios? Have education, social assistance/protection and pro-poorest growth played major roles in Swedish bilateral aid to countries in the long-term development cooperation group?

Table 2

2012-2013	Tackling extreme poverty				Ending impoverishment				Staying out of poverty			
	Better quality basic educ	Social assist.	Pro-poorest econ. growth	Affirm. action, anti-discrim.	Universal health care	savings & insur.	disaster risk mgmt	Prevent conflict	Assets, land policies, mobility	Skills training labor market links	social protect	Universal SRHR
Zambia			+++	+	+++	+			++			+
Tanzan.	++		+*	+	++*	+*			+*	+		++
Rwanda		+				+		++	+		+	
Mocam.	+*	++	++		+*	+*	+		+++*		+++*	
Mali**		+++	++	+	+		+	+	+			
Burkina Faso			(+++*)		++*				+++			
Kenya	+	++	+++	+	+	+		+	++	+	+	+
Bangla.	+++			+	+++		+			+		++
Uganda			++		+++	+*	+	+				+++
Ethiopia	+	+++	+	+			++		+			+
Cambod	+++								+			+
Bolivia	+++		++	+	++				++	++	+	+

Source: Own classifications based on project documentation and other related documentation of involved actors in the 12 countries. + refers to intervention < 10 MSEK and thematically limited; ++ intervention 10-30 MSEK; +++ intervention > 30 MSEK and thematically comprehensive; *Supported through general budget support; **The program in Mali changed substantially during 2013, due to the political situation.

In table 2 the results of our assessment is presented. Countries are in the table ranked according to their headcount poverty incidences (under the USD 1,25/day threshold), with the highest rates of poverty at the top of the table. Boxes filled with colours indicate that activities have been undertaken with finances from Swedish bilateral aid. Empty boxes indicate that no activities have been supported. Yellow boxes refer to interventions in the field of education and skills training. Red

boxes refer to interventions in the field of social protection or assistance, blue boxes refer to interventions in the field of economic growth or resource management, and green boxes refer to interventions in the area of health. The lilac boxes refer to interventions concerning socio-political relations, such as armed conflict or discrimination of social groups.

A first oversight indicates that about half of the boxes are coloured. Whether this means that the poverty reduction glass of Swedish aid is half filled or half empty is up to the reader to judge. When counting the number of +, it emerges that the majority of them are single +, more than the ++ and +++ together. Swedish aid is thus fairly thinly disbursed, with many relatively small interventions moneywise. There is a clear focus on interventions of the pro-poorest growth kind, whereas education and social assistance/protection is lacking in many places.

Across-the-board policies

Swedish support to the three across-the-board policy areas is found by analysing the coloured boxes in the table. A search for yellow boxes (education and skills), red boxes (social protection) and blue boxes (pro-poor growth) shows that the yellow and red are much less represented than the blue ones. Swedish bilateral aid to the selected 12 countries is good at targeting pro-poor growth interventions. However, interventions in the broad areas of education and skills training, as well as in social protection are largely lacking. This implies, generally speaking, that Swedish aid contributes to open up access to markets for poor people. However, it is much weaker at providing support to capabilities and skills needed to act on such markets. It is also much weaker at providing platforms for people to deal with the risks that they face in their daily life and as market agents.

The next step of the analysis is to assess more precisely what kind of interventions that are supported, and how they fit into a pattern of the three distinct processes of poverty reduction – tackling extreme poverty, ending impoverishment and staying out of poverty.

In some of the 12 countries, Swedish bilateral aid interventions cover a rather limited spectre of poverty reducing interventions. It is reasonable to talk about comprehensive programs only in four of the countries – Kenya, Bolivia, Tanzania and Mozambique. In two of these countries – Tanzania and Mozambique – it is the general budget support that is a major reason behind the comprehensiveness. Since we find these four countries evenly spread along the table, it can be noted that there is no link between the comprehensiveness of poverty programs and the degree of poverty in the partner countries. Bolivia, with the lowest incidence of poverty, is one of the countries with the most comprehensive poverty programs. It is similar in this respect to Kenya in the middle, and to Mozambique and Tanzania with some of the highest incidences of poverty.

Specific policies within the poverty tripod

When analysing the distribution across the three legs in the poverty “tripod” it emerges that Sweden in its bilateral aid to these countries has a strong focus on pro-poor economic growth, resource management and health interventions to reach those living in poverty. There are no strong differences in focus between the three legs in the tripod (tackling extreme poverty, ending

impoverishment or staying out of poverty), even though relatively more effort is geared towards the tackling of extreme poverty. Rather, differences emerge within the legs of the tripod.

One observation from across-the-board poverty reducing policies is valid also within the tripod. Sweden seems particularly weak in two central thematic areas – contributing to broad and relevant education and skills training, and providing social protection and assistance. Education is still a very strong Swedish field in the sample countries from Latin America and Asia as well as in Tanzania. However, in all other African countries it is absent. Why?

Swedish aid to universal health care is well focused on poverty reduction, and present in most of the country portfolios. However, further than this, Swedish bilateral aid seems fairly weak in its contributions to stopping impoverishment. It is natural that conflict reducing interventions are applied only to conflict ridden societies. However, disaster risk management as well as savings and insurance are more widely relevant in most countries. Still, such interventions are weakly represented in Swedish bilateral aid to the 12 countries.

Programs to support people to stay out of poverty are also relatively one-sided. Interventions that support people's access to productive assets and help to promote more inclusive land policies are well-represented. However, other interventions that support people in strengthening their resilience are thinly represented.

Concluding remarks

In several cases Swedish bilateral aid portfolios lack such interventions that the Chronic Poverty Report 2014-2015 and research more widely finds key to poverty reduction. Weaknesses seem more pronounced in the areas of education and social protection. Furthermore, Swedish bilateral aid portfolios seem somewhat weaker on interventions aiming at ending impoverishment and supporting people in staying out of poverty than on targeting extreme poverty.

This is valid for the group of 12 partner countries where the Swedish poverty profile can be assumed to be the strongest. Only in four of these countries Sweden runs aid programs that can be said to be comprehensive in coverage. In addition, many of the interventions deemed to be effective at poverty reduction are supported with relatively small amounts of money. From a poverty reduction perspective, Swedish bilateral aid to these countries seems on one hand not as comprehensive as it could be, and on the other thinly spread and hence less focused than would be possible.

There are many possible explanations to why we find this pattern, which is described in table 2. It can be argued that Swedish aid portfolios need to – and have been – tailored to the specific needs of each country, and developed after negotiations with a long row of other donors. The rationale would be that if others are doing their parts, Sweden may concentrate on selected areas instead of running comprehensive poverty reducing programmes. However, what is strange is that such coordination is not mentioned in key documents, such as the reports on Swedish country strategies for the countries in the sample. We have searched for this information in all relevant 24 country strategy reports for the two years studied, while finding very few references made to it.

Results reported in relation to Swedish country strategies are in these 12 country cases generally referring to results obtained by the partner country as such. This way, there is very little, if any, attribution of results to the Swedish contributions. The issue of Swedish attribution of results is rather dealt with at the level of program or project interventions, which is a more direct and tangible – but also less general – level. Discussions about how Swedish strategies may have better contributed to improved overall results for the partner country become limited. Such discussions either concern whether Sweden is contributing in areas where the country experiences obvious problems, or they concern how specific programs with Swedish support may be improved. Almost no discussions are found in the reports about Swedish complementarity to what the government or other national actors do, or to what other donors do.

An overall assessment is that the programming of Swedish interventions could have been more strategic when it comes to selecting interventions for the reduction of poverty in the partner countries.

A possible counterargument would be that the scheme towards which interventions have been assessed is marginal or less representative of what constitutes good poverty reducing policies. However, even if we have basically leaned on one single report for shaping this theme (The Chronic Poverty Report 2014), the content is not new or unknown. The messages are well in line with other research findings.

This adds up to a conclusion; There has not been enough focus on poverty reduction on what works in poverty reduction when Swedish bilateral aid allocation decision have been made in the 12 partner countries where Sweden supports long term development. Too few country programs are comprehensive enough. At the same time, more specific interventions are not focussed enough, and may possibly be less coordinated with others' interventions. Sweden could choose between two strategies to deal with this. One option is to develop more comprehensive poverty reduction approaches in these country programs. Another option would be to specialize and focus more, while assuring that partner country governments or other donors do other key interventions.

However, this critique is not meant to deny the many important interventions aimed at reducing poverty that already has been, and are being done with Swedish bilateral aid. Furthermore, it is not a statement about the quality or effectiveness of Swedish bilateral aid. Those issues have not been studied in this paper.

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