

Organisational learning at Sida – a twenty-year perspective

Have the conditions for organisational learning at Sida improved over the past two decades? In the 1987-88 period, the Swedish National Audit Office performed an evaluation of SIDA's organisational learning abilities. The evaluation was partly based on a survey of attitudes and opinions among SIDA's personnel. This survey has been replicated by SADEV. "*Lär sig Sida mer än förr? En jämförande studie av attityderna till lärande inom Sida idag och för tjugo år sedan*" (SADEV Report 2008:1) discusses future challenges and opportunities in the development of learning systems at Sida. SADEV presents a set of recommendations, such as allocating more time to every day learning, introducing a mentoring system and improving the exchange of information and knowledge between headquarters and field offices.

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SADEV's survey of organisational learning at Sida was sent to 72 program officers at two head-quarter units and eight field offices, and to Sida's management team. The respondent groups were chosen to correspond with the sample used in the Swedish National Audit Office's 1987 evaluation. The survey questions concerned attitudes and opinions about a range of topics, such as the preparation of development cooperation, organisational memory, feedback on experience, evaluations, the use of consultants, staff development and time management. Some minor adjustments were made to the original questionnaire of 1987 to take into account changes made in Sida's internal organisation. A number of major trends were observed, based on an analysis of statistically significant differences between response levels.

POSTITIVE TENDENCIES

Over the past twenty years Sida has made substantial efforts to formalise its systems of organisational learning. The agency has defined itself as a 'knowledge organisation' and issued internal policies for learning and competence development. Consequently there is an improved awareness among Sida personnel about the importance of learning activities. The agency's personnel are also now better informed about 'external' development cooperation activities, for example those at other donor organisations.

REMAINING PROBLEMS

Notwithstanding Sida's efforts to improve the conditions for learning at the agency, problems remain. A lack of time and incentives for engaging in learning activities is perceived as the most problematic issue

that stifles learning opportunities. Program officers indicate that a substantial proportion of their learning occurs in every day work situations. However, they perceive that too many working hours are devoted to administrative tasks and to the procurement of consultants.

CURRENT CHALLENGES

Changes in the surrounding environment and within the agency itself have introduced new challenges for Sida's learning. An important internal challenge is to improve the exchange of knowledge between headquarter units and delegated field offices. Another challenge is to adjust to the need for more complex considerations in the preparation of development cooperation, both in the form of broader macro-oriented analysis, and through the increased inclusion of other actors' views and perspectives. The survey results indicate that the required shift in capacities – from 'specialist' to 'generalist' knowledge – is not yet fully accommodated by Sida personnel.

FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

Sida is planning an intensive reform process over the next few years. Anticipated changes include the concentration of operations on fewer countries and sectors, an increase in personnel turnover due to retirements, and a strengthening of the field organisation. These changes provide opportunities for the development of administrative systems and working methods to improve the conditions for organisational learning. Meanwhile, Sida must develop effective continuity procedures

to ensure that valuable knowledge is not lost in the reorganisation process.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- *Allocate more time to every day learning*, for example by reducing the overlap of administrative systems and making them more user-friendly.
- *Increase incentives for individual learning initiatives*, for example by permitting individual and group study time during paid working hours.
- *Improve the exchange of information and knowledge between headquarters and field offices*, for example by homogenising administrative systems, and by initiating more direct cooperation activities across units.
- *Improve the continuity in contribution management*, for example through more formal procedures for the handover of roles and responsibilities between program officers, or through a mentoring system.
- *Adapt the personnel profile to the increased complexity of work tasks*, for example by recruiting 'project managers' with generalist competencies, and by utilising the knowledge and skills of program officers with specialist knowledge across several projects simultaneously.
- *Develop strategies for exchanging experiences with other development cooperation actors.*

SOURCES AND FURTHER INFORMATION

Lär sig Sida mer än förr? En jämförande studie av attityderna till lärande inom Sida idag och för tjugo år sedan, Anna Krohwinkel-Karlsson, SADEV Report 2008:1. SADEV's publications are available at www.sadev.se.

“SIDA” denotes the agency in 1987; “Sida” denotes the present agency.