



SUMMARY

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**EVALUATION OF THE NORMATIVE IMPACT OF SWEDISH
SENIOR SECONDMENTS IN SWEDEN'S DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION
AN EXTENDED SUMMARY**

Lisa Dellmuth, Paul T. Levin, Nicklas Svensson

Evaluation of the Normative Impact of Swedish Senior Secondments in Sweden's Development Cooperation

An extended English summary

Lisa Dellmuth
Paul T. Levin
Nicklas Svensson

Extended report summary

to

The Expert Group for Aid Studies (EBA)

This report is an extended English summary of the evaluation of Swedish senior secondments in Sweden's development cooperation. The main report is available in Swedish only. The full report presents a broader set of findings, conclusions and recommendations. In particular, the main report also provides a more elaborated treatment of the evaluation design and methodologies used.

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Introduction

As a global actor and aid donor, Sweden has had a long and active involvement and cooperation with multilateral organisations, such as the European Union (EU) and the United Nations (UN). These organisations are tasked with solving global challenges and helping states fight poverty, promote democracy, improve sustainable development, and counter violence and armed conflict.

Sweden uses several tools to support and influence international organisations in their work to deal with these challenges across local, national, and global contexts. Seconding civil servants and experts from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), the Swedish Government Offices and other Swedish expert authorities to international organisations is one such tool. Sweden currently has eleven secondment programs that Sida manages, including two programs for *senior* secondments to the EU and the UN: *the Senior Secondment Program to Multilateral Organisations* (MSS) to UN organisations and *the National Expert Secondment Program* (SNE) to the European Commission and European External Services.

This executive summary outlines and discusses key findings in a report commissioned and funded by the Expert Group for Aid Studies (EBA) on the use of secondments as an instrument of influencing international organisations in line with Swedish development policy priorities. The report is written by a team of independent experts and scholars.

Evaluation objectives & questions

Swedish legal guidelines and frameworks specify three main objectives for Sweden's use of secondments: (1) to strengthen the competence of the Swedish resource base (personnel) for development cooperation; (2) to contribute to knowledge and expertise within the EU and the UN system; and (3) normative advocacy work to

strengthen the impact of Swedish development policy priorities in international development cooperation. This third goal implies that Sweden's senior secondments aim to go beyond capacity building by increasing the normative impact of Swedish development policy priorities in international development cooperation. This particular normative objective is the focus of this report, and the next section will define what we mean by "normative impact".

The report answers three key questions:

1. To what extent have senior secondments within the MSS and SNE programs contributed to a normative impact of Swedish development cooperation?
2. Based on Swedish as well as foreign experiences, how can the normative impact of secondments within the MSS and SNE programs be enhanced in line with Swedish development goals?
3. What conflicts of interest (practical or principal) characterise the use of senior secondments within MSS and SNE, and what potentially unintended consequences can these have on the normative impact of secondments?

Evaluation design and method

The Swedish regulatory framework does not explicitly state what is meant by the "normative impact" of Swedish senior secondments. We understand this notion to mean results in line with Swedish foreign policy priorities through the (i) diffusion of knowledge, (ii) diffusion of norms, or (iii) change of working procedures.

Result (i) occurs if seconded persons influence the knowledge of individuals in the recipient organisation through increased awareness or expertise in a way that promotes Swedish development policy priorities. Result (ii) occurs if a seconded person contributes to strengthening norms within the recipient organisation, and result (iii) occurs if a seconded person contributes to changing work processes, all in line with Swedish priorities.

This report also examines practical and principled conflicts of interest or trade-offs in the use of senior secondments within MSS and SNE and what (potentially unforeseen) consequences such trade-offs can have. It is important to protect the independence of recipient multilateral organisations, yet donors may wish to influence these organisations in order to push them in a certain direction. This may cause challenges that resemble the discussions about dependence versus independence in tied versus untied aid.

The report's conclusions and recommendations are based on an analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data that include a web-based survey of 68 Swedish and international civil servants with experience of secondments, an extensive review of relevant documents, and interviews with a large number of key informants to help us understand the policy context of secondments and validate observations. We present six case studies of senior secondments within the UN system and the European Commission (three within MSS and three within SNE, covering the period 2014–2021). The case studies were chosen to ensure variation regarding the type of secondment program/host organisation (both MSS/UN and SNE/EU), issue area (climate, gender, technical, and joint programming), and placement within organisation (both headquarter and field). The case studies compliment the survey, allowing us to examine in greater depth what impact secondments have on the receiving organisations, and what factors and conditions contributed to (or prevented) impact.

Key findings

Our key finding is that, under the right conditions and circumstances, senior Swedish secondments can be an effective means to achieve normative influence on international organisations (objective 2), but that there is currently an untapped potential.

There is broad agreement among secondees, former secondees, and practitioners working with secondments that secondments ought to be used as an instrument for normative impact. 72% of all surveyed practitioners fully agreed with the statement that secondments should be used as a strategic tool to promote Swedish priorities for international development cooperation. However, 69% of respondents fully or partially agreed that there is room for secondments to be used more effectively for this objective. Only 21% thought that secondments were used effectively to promote Swedish priorities.

In all six of our case studies, we found that the secondments had the effect of enhancing the capacity of the recipient institution. In four of the six case studies, we saw that the secondments had a normative impact in line with Swedish development priorities. This kind of impact was identified in all three case studies within the MSS program, but only one of the three case studies within the SNE program.

The four successful secondments with respect to normative change brought expert knowledge (i), key values (ii), and contributed to changed working methods (iii) within the recipient organisations. The impact is well aligned with Sweden's policy priorities for international development cooperation: the Swedish senior secondments examined in the case studies have promoted a gender perspective, an environmental and climate perspective, as well as a rights-based perspective. Not only secondees themselves, but also their colleagues and managers in the multilateral organisations and in local institutions highlighted these perspectives as a major contribution by the Swedish secondments.

We found that two case studies within the SNE program did not achieve any impact beyond capacity-building effects. This was partly due to a lack of in-depth dialogue between Sida and the recipient organisations. The job descriptions for the secondments were not as clear as would have been needed to ensure that the secondments could make an impact. This shortcoming is also visible in our survey, in which only 16% of the secondees indicated that the normative

objectives of their secondment was perfectly clear. 40% thought that the objectives were somewhat clear. The case of successful normative impact among the studied SNE cases revealed all three results, in part through the secondees' active and deliberately normative and strategic participation in drafting manuals and strategy documents in the host organisation.

In addition to the secondees' efforts, we identified factors and enabling conditions for achieving desired normative results through senior secondments. To begin with, the local context matters. This includes the structure, culture and leadership of the recipient organisations, as well as the country context. Multilateral organisations such as the UN and European Commission are governed from the top, with less flexibility for senior or mid-level staff than you would typically find in Swedish organisations, where a consensus-oriented management approach is more prevalent. Secondees can be limited by this local context, and clear and precise job descriptions are important to enable secondees to more easily launch their own 'strategic' initiatives which can lead to normative impact.

Moreover, normative impact is more likely when Sida and the Ministry for Foreign Affairs' (MFA) have identified strategic placements within multilateral organisations for senior experts. A job description that is based on a needs analysis by the recipient organisation and close dialogue between the recipient organisation and Sida during the recruitment process also make intentional impact more likely. Lastly, we found that desired impact appears more likely when Swedish senior secondments can be recruited from a larger resource base.

In sum, understanding the local context, clear objectives and job descriptions, open dialogue between Sida and host organisation, and a large resource base, are all key enabling conditions for more strategic impact through senior secondments. Our analysis underlines the importance of embedding secondments as a tool in the context of a well thought-out overall strategy for advocacy work, preferably based on an explicit theory of change.

The evaluation also identifies several potential conflicts of interest or trade-offs between the effectiveness of secondments and consequences thereof. We identified three main trade-offs. First, we found a trade-off between achieving cumulative effects through several secondments, which can be a desirable strategy to increase the likelihood of desired impact and guaranteeing the independence of the recipient organisations. Second, we found a trade-off between continued regular communication between Swedish authorities and the secondee during the secondment and guaranteeing the integrity and independence of the secondee. Third and finally, we found a trade-off between strengthening the recipient organisation's capacity in the long term through senior secondments, and the availability of Swedish senior experts from the Swedish resource base. Pooling human resources from the same home organisation risks having a negative effect due to losing key competence for a longer period and difficulties in finding substitutions for those positions.

Conclusions

Our overall conclusion is that senior secondments are a useful tool for promoting normative impact in line with Swedish development cooperation priorities but that there is considerable room for improvement. We found evidence for normative impact in four out of six cases of senior secondments. We conclude that most, but not all, senior Swedish secondments to multilateral institutions that we studied have made an impact on their host institutions in line with Swedish development priorities by bringing relevant knowledge, values, and changed working procedures.

Our analysis of international experiences with secondments underlines the importance of embedding secondments and objectives in the context of an overall strategy for advocacy work, preferably based on an explicit theory of change. Additional factors that facilitate the strategic use of secondments as an instrument of normative influence include a good understanding of the local

context, clear and strategic objectives and job descriptions, an open dialogue between Sida and host organisations, and a large resource base from which to recruit candidates.

These success factors can be identified through the whole secondment cycle, and there is room for improvement throughout. This includes better preparations prior to departure, more strategic placements with clearer objectives, and increased contact between secondee and home institution during secondment. The most evident current shortcoming is the failure to properly make use of the expertise and experience of seconded staff upon their return. Not properly rewarding secondments in hiring and promotion also creates disincentives for potential future secondees, which negatively impacts the size of the resource base for secondments.

Finally, we identify and discuss a number of trade-offs between Swedish authorities' desire to use secondments to drive Swedish development priorities and the desire of multilateral recipient institutions to maintain autonomy from member state pressures: between achieving cumulative effects and safeguarding the independence of multilateral institutions, between regular communication between secondees and home institutions and respecting the independence of secondees, and between strengthening the recipient organisation's capacity and keeping specific competence within the Swedish resource base. In part because Swedish development priorities are anchored in global norms and compacts such as the Sustainable Development Goals, we did not view these trade-offs as constituting a major obstacle to using secondments to promote these priorities more effectively.

Recommendations

Based on the evaluation's conclusions, we make a number of recommendations for how Swedish authorities can improve the use of secondments to affect desired change. One of our key recommendations is to place secondments in the context of an

overall strategy for Swedish influence as well as of a theory of change. Using secondments more effectively to create change would also be promoted by the formulation of clearer objectives for both specific secondments and secondments in general. Other recommendations for home institutions include better communications with secondees during their tenure, making better use of returnees in training outgoing secondees, and drawing more upon their expertise and experiences during but especially after their secondments. We also suggest measures to broaden the recruitment base for secondment, in part by enhancing the attractiveness of secondments.

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Expertgruppen för biståndsanalys (EBA) är en statlig kommitté som oberoende analyserar och utvärderar svenskt internationellt bistånd.

The Expert Group for Aid Studies (EBA) is a government committee with a mandate to independently analyse and evaluate Swedish international development aid.