

Strategy for Sweden's regional development  
cooperation in

# Asia and the Pacific region

2016–2021



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Cover: Editorial Office, MFA  
Article no: UD 16.038



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Government Offices  
of Sweden

# Strategy for Sweden's regional development cooperation in Asia and the Pacific region 2016–2021

## 1. Focus

Within the framework of this strategy, regional development cooperation in Asia and the Pacific is to contribute to increased regional integration and collaboration for sustainable development in the region. The purpose of the activities is to contribute to strengthening the ability of regional actors to deal with transboundary challenges and opportunities in the areas of human rights, democracy and gender equality, and environment and climate change in a mutually reinforcing way. The strategy will apply in 2016–2021 and provide a total of SEK 1 800 million.

Within the framework of the strategy, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) is expected to contribute to:

**Sustainable development in Asia through mutual interaction between human rights, democracy, gender equality, environment and climate change**

With a focus on environmentally and climate-resilient sustainable development and sustainable use of natural resources

- Enhanced regional collaboration to strengthen resilience to mutual environmental and climate problems and natural disasters
- Improved regional collaboration and sustainable use of transboundary natural resources

With a focus on human rights, democracy and gender equality

- Strengthened capacity of regional actors to promote greater accountability and increased democratic space
- Strengthened capacity of regional actors to promote human rights and gender equality

## 2. Regional context

The Asia-Pacific is a region of major differences between countries and sub-regions and between different groups within the countries. The region includes some of the smallest countries in the world with relatively few inhabitants and the two most populous countries, India and China. The region comprises everything from well-functioning democracies to highly authoritarian states. Of relevance to development cooperation is that the Asian context is characterised by substantial and poverty-related challenges caused by environmental degradation, climate change, lack of respect for democratic principles and human rights, and the absence of gender equality.

The region's rapid economic development, with trade and investment as driving forces, has made a significant contribution to poverty reduction. However, in several places, this rapid growth has had adverse impacts on the environment and human rights. Despite progress on the Millennium Development Goals in most countries in the region, income inequality and other forms of inequality have increased markedly. Many places still suffer severe and widespread poverty, not only income poverty. Still today, more than 1.6 billion people in the region live on less than USD 2 a day. A large proportion of them live in middle-income countries or soon-to-be middle-income countries. The region has the highest number of hungry people in the world. Most of the people living in poverty are women and children and the vast majority are dependent on agricultural production for their income. Women play an important role in food production but lack rights to land, financing, technology and more. Ensuring food security is therefore integral to reducing inequality and to sustainable development in the region.

The links between environment and climate-resilient sustainable development, and human rights, democracy and gender equality are clear in Asia, especially for people living in poverty. In some parts, countries prioritise economic growth at the expense of the environment and human rights. Environmental and climate problems affect people's lives and rights such as access to clean water, food, sanitation and health. A democratic deficit and lack of respect for human rights and land rights affect people's ability to demand accountability and to contribute to dialogue and decision-making for more sustainable development.

A fast-growing population, the rapid pace of urbanisation and rapid economic growth have had a range of adverse environment impacts. Environmental degradation of land, sea and river ecosystems, and the unsustainable exploitation of natural resources have a serious impact on humans and the environment. Environmentally harmful emissions, exposure to hazardous substances and air pollution are further examples of the growing challenges for the region. Biodiversity loss and illegal trade in natural resources are regional problems. The region is characterised by the most severe impacts of climate change on Earth, such as extreme weather systems and unbalanced ecosystems. Ninety per cent of people forced to flee because of natural disasters live in the Asia-Pacific region. According to the United Nations, natural disasters in the region are largely due to climate change and primarily affect the poorest people. Climate change impacts are particularly apparent in the Oceania region. Small island states are recognised in the Paris climate agreement, along with the least developed countries, as particularly vulnerable to climate change. Women and girls suffer disproportionately from the impacts of climate change and disasters, but are also important agents of change who possess knowledge that is critical for sustainable development.

In terms of respect for human rights, Asia is a very diverse region. There is no regional convention that protects human rights. Ratification of key UN conventions is generally low and they are seldom incorporated into national legislation, resulting in national legal systems that provide inadequate human rights protection. The level of gender equality and women's rights varies significantly between and within countries in the region. Gender differences are large in terms of economic opportunities and political influence in society. Gender-based violence is widespread. Many countries lack legislation guaranteeing women full rights, and traditions and attitudes are an obstacle to greater gender equality. Meanwhile, in many places, women are key actors in areas such as trade and academia. Civil society space is being severely reduced; increased surveillance and control, and new legislation are restricting freedom of assembly and association. The Press Freedom Index classifies more than half of the countries in the region as very repressive of freedom of the press and freedom of expression. Many of the threats that human rights defenders, journalists, trade unionists and environmentalists perceive

from government and private actors are directly or indirectly linked to environmental and climate issues. Strengthening human rights – economic, social and civil – provides opportunities for women and men and girls and boys to preserve and protect the environment and the natural resources that they are often directly dependent on for their livelihoods.

Many countries have difficulties responding to the exploitation of land and other natural resources. This affects the poorest and most marginalised groups, in particular rural women and indigenous peoples, and is a root cause of social tensions and conflicts. Conflicts or post-conflict situations in several parts of Asia can, in turn, be exacerbated by the effects of environmental degradation and climate change.

Corruption is widespread. Weak institutional capacity and lack of rule of law, especially with regard to land rights, affect the poorest and most marginalised groups in particular. Indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities are often discriminated against and vulnerable in the countries where they live. In a number of Asian countries, fundamental labour rights are severely curtailed and trade unions are repressed by both governments and enterprises. Employer organisations are sometimes also affected by the lack of rights. All in all, this impedes the right to collective bargaining and constructive social dialogue. Long supply chains make it more difficult to control and manage working conditions even for companies with good intentions. Weak structures and lack of rights also make it harder to protect the rights of domestic workers and migrant workers, the majority of whom are women. Trafficking in human beings and forced labour are growing problems.

Asian cooperation is complex and differs throughout the region. Regional integration is weak and strong regional institutions are lacking. The countries in the three sub-regions have organised themselves in different ways. South Asia, for example, has the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Heart of Asia regional process, South-East Asia has ASEAN, and the Oceania region has the Pacific Island Forum (PIF) and the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC).

An important reason for pursuing regional development cooperation in the Asia-Pacific is that regional cooperation can contribute to improving the management of challenges related to the environment, climate and

natural resources, which are often transboundary in nature. Regional cooperation is also considered to be a way forward in terms of achieving progress in the areas of human rights, democracy and gender equality, where it may be difficult for actors to operate and work effectively at national level. Experience, including from Swedish development cooperation in the region, has shown that progress in one area is closely linked to progress in other areas. By working to ensure that regional actors adopt an integrated approach to managing the environment and climate change, and human rights, democracy and gender equality, the chances of achieving sustainable results in these two areas will improve; this is expected to have an impact on people living in poverty in the individual countries. The approach is multidisciplinary, partnership-oriented and problem-based, in line with the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals.

Sweden is one of few donors in the region focusing on strengthening regional actors and regional collaboration. Sweden's regional development cooperation has good experience of integrating environmental and climate work with human rights, democracy and gender equality. Sweden has a strategic role in pursuing this approach, with great potential to influence the lives of people living in poverty. In addition, a clear thematic focus creates favourable conditions for cooperation in the region and leads to more effective efforts in a large geographical region where Sweden is a relatively small but potentially influential donor.

### **3. Activities**

Sweden's regional development cooperation in Asia and the Pacific region is to be based on and characterised by a rights perspective and the perspective of poor people on development. The rights perspective means that human rights and democracy are regarded as fundamental to development. This approach involves giving visibility, prior to each contribution, to individuals and groups that are discriminated against, excluded and marginalised, so that all people will be able to enjoy their rights, regardless of gender, age, disability, ethnicity, religion or other belief, sexual orientation, transgender identity or expression. The perspective of poor people on development means that the situation,

needs, circumstances and priorities of poor women, men and children must be used as the basis for poverty reduction and the promotion of equitable and sustainable development.

Sweden's development cooperation is to be economically, socially and environmentally sustainable, and also gender-equal. The basis of development cooperation is a comprehensive view of the challenges, needs and conditions of people and societies. The guiding principle is that economic, social and environmental conditions and processes are to be understood and managed in an integrated context. Gender equality and the empowerment and rights of women and girls, are both goals in themselves and a prerequisite and a means for achieving sustainable global development. Violence and armed conflict are among the greatest obstacles to economic and social development, and development cooperation is an important part of conflict prevention. An environmental and climate perspective, a gender perspective and a conflict perspective must therefore be systematically integrated into regional development cooperation in Asia and the Pacific region.

Sweden's regional cooperation with Asia and the Pacific region will cover South Asia, South-East Asia and small island states in the Pacific. Adjacent sub-regions affecting the strategy's implementation may be involved.

Regional development cooperation is to focus on better enabling regional actors to manage cross-border problems and challenges where solutions can best be sought in regional cooperation. Regional value added is a key starting point for activities. Cooperation is to be sought with regional change agents that have the potential to support and influence regional actors or states to take greater responsibility for the environment and climate, human rights, democracy and gender equality.

Activities is to be conducted in a manner that strengthens the ability of regional actors to integrate an environmental and climate perspective into programmes related to human rights, democracy and gender equality, and that strengthens regional actors' efforts to promote respect for human rights, greater opportunities for democratic participation and gender mainstreaming into programmes related to environment, climate and natural resources.

Activities are to take account of the intergovernmental organisations that are considered relevant. Cooperation with a range of civil society actors and the research community is a central component. In implementing the strategy, Sweden is to work to promote increased resource mobilisation from partners, and sustainable and responsible investment. Sweden is to contribute to innovative financing mechanisms, for example by facilitating partnerships with enterprises. The business sector can be involved with the aim of moving their operations towards greater sustainability and mobilising their expertise and resources. Trade union organisations and civil society can be important partners in these efforts.

Sida is to ensure an integrated approach to Sweden's total support to the region. Synergies are to be sought with bilateral activities in the region. Synergies should be sought with relevant strategies. Synergies are also to be sought with Sweden's humanitarian aid.

Sweden is to seek to strengthen the capacity of regional actors to follow, participate and implement international and regional agreements with a bearing on the strategy's objectives. Activities are to contribute to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

Sweden is to contribute to enhanced regional collaboration to increase people's resilience to transboundary environmental and climate problems, and natural disasters. This may include activities to enhance capacity to apply for and manage climate financing, and activities to promote more resilient agriculture, forestry and fisheries. The latter also strengthens poor people's ability to take part in, and become an integral part of, economic development. The focus may be on issues characterised by women's and girls' lack of access to human rights. Strengthened regional capacity for climate action and climate financing can support the implementation of countries' national commitments under the Paris Agreement. To contribute to improved support and data in decision-making processes on environmental and climate issues, Sweden is to promote increased and broad participation in democratic processes, including in environmental and social impact assessments, linked to natural resources or infrastructure. Sweden is to contribute to increasing the participation of women, ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples in democratic processes.

Swedish development cooperation is to contribute to improving regional management and sustainable use of transboundary natural resources, such as water, agriculture, forests and marine resources. This may include activities that help the value of ecosystems and biodiversity become better integrated into the central decision-making data at national and local level. Support is to focus on increasing the participation of rights holders in the design and supervision of policy, planning and implementation of sustainable natural resource management. This may include, for example, support to regional civil society organisations representing discriminated groups, such as women and indigenous peoples.

Activities are to enhance the awareness of actors concerned with environmental and climate issues, including natural resources, of the importance and relevance of integrating better access to human rights, democratic participation and gender equality to achieve the goals of a cleaner environment and reduced climate impact.

Increased access to renewable energy can contribute to realising the right to health, education, work and clean water. Renewable energy is to be integrated into activities where access to energy is a means of increasing poor people's resilience to environmental impacts, climate change and natural disasters. Activities can also include support to strengthen mechanisms and innovative financing solutions that will help increase the capacity for effective climate change-related planning, management and investments. The guarantee instrument can be used to increase investments focusing on, for example, renewable energy and climate adaptation, and reduced climate impacts.

Sweden is to contribute to strengthening capacity among regional actors to promote greater accountability and democratic space, particularly in relation to the environment and climate. Regional actors that can contribute to the development of independent arenas for information sharing, networking and accountability in relation to human rights and also to the promotion of environmentally sustainable development in the region is to be supported. Priority areas include freedom of expression and right to information, including media and internet freedom. Particular attention is to be paid to the conditions and situation of human rights defenders, including women's rights activists, journalists, trade unions

and environmentalists, in a regional perspective. When necessary, flexibility and scope is to be available to respond to challenges to regional development.

Support to regional actors that enable rights holders to participate in the design and supervision of activities affecting compliance with their human rights is to be included. The ability of regional actors to draw on the knowledge, experience and proposals of women and other discriminated groups concerning solutions for developing international, regional and national policies to increase resilience and preparedness in relation to the environment, climate, natural resources and natural disasters is to be strengthened. Regional aspects of workers' rights are to be included. This may involve support to activities contributing to capacity-building of social partners and promoting the establishment of regional platforms for cooperation in accordance with the ILO's Decent Work Agenda and for environmentally sustainable production. Issues concerning the rights of migrant workers are important.

Swedish development cooperation is to contribute to strengthening the ability of regional actors to work on human rights in relation to climate and environmental problems, and prevention in relation to natural disasters, focusing in particular on women's and children's rights. Increased resilience also helps to counter the root causes of tensions and armed conflicts. This may include regional actors' capacity to effectively promote gender equality and their ability to influence regional institutions to implement international agreements such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), including the UN action plan from the Conference on Women in Beijing and the follow-up conferences and commissions. It may also mean clearer links to, for instance, the implementation of environment and climate-related conventions. Activities are to support the development of regional mechanisms for accountability and rule of law that guarantees human rights. In this context, activities to strengthen the capacity of regional actors to combat sexual and gender-based violence in all its forms may be included.

Follow-up procedures are outlined in the Government's guidelines for strategies. Evaluations are to be considered an integral part of

continuous follow-up and are to be conducted when necessary. Various performance monitoring methods is to be used to obtain both qualitative and quantitative performance information. A balance should be sought between short-term and long-term results of the contribution portfolio to ensure that Swedish development cooperation will contribute to equitable and sustainable development.