

Ministry for Foreign Affairs**Strategy for Sweden's regional development cooperation with
the Middle East and North Africa 2021–2025****1. Focus**

The objective of Sweden's international development cooperation is to create conditions to improve the lives of people living in poverty and oppression. Sweden's development cooperation is based on the principles of aid and development effectiveness, the 2030 Agenda, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda and the Paris Agreement. Sweden's feminist foreign policy will guide the activities.

The strategy applies in 2021–2025 and provides a total of SEK 2.425 billion; of this, an average of SEK 80 million per year is ear-marked for bilateral aid to Yemen.

The strategy governs the use of funds under appropriation item 17 in the appropriation directions for the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) for each budget year.

Activities will contribute to the following objectives:

Democracy, human rights, the rule of law and gender equality

- Strengthened capacity of institutions, civil society and the media with a view to promoting democratic development, increased respect for human rights and the rule of law
- A more gender-equal society, with a focus on the empowerment, participation and influence of women and girls

Inclusive and sustainable economic development and regional trade

- Expanded and deepened regional economic integration
- Increased access to productive employment with decent working conditions, taking into account the situation of women and young people in the labour market

Environmentally and climate resilient sustainable development and sustainable use of natural resources

- Strengthened resilience to climate change, reduced climate impact and environmentally sustainable development
- Sustainable management and use of transboundary natural resources, and protection and restoration of biodiversity

Peaceful and inclusive societies

- Strengthened capacity and processes to prevent, manage and resolve conflicts by peaceful means, taking into account women's participation

Peaceful development in Yemen

- Improved conditions for peaceful development, with inclusive dialogue at different levels
- Strengthened respect for human rights
- Increased capacity to provide basic public services and promote sustainable development

2. Regional context

Regional development cooperation with the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is conducted in a context marked by weak democracies, weak judicial independence, a lack of respect for human rights, socio-economic inequalities and recurring expressions of popular discontent. The distance between political leaders and the population is often large, and participation

in political life is limited. Women and girls are subjected to structural discrimination, and in several countries the lack of gender equality is pervasive. Conflict and post-conflict conditions prevail in a number of countries.

Climate and environmental challenges are extensive; this also contributes to increasing the risk of conflict. These challenges include water shortages, dramatic temperature rises, biodiversity loss, food insecurity and degraded ecosystems. The protracted water shortages in the region have been further exacerbated by the impacts of climate change, population growth and weak administrative structures. Dependence on fossil fuel energy is high. At the same time, there is good potential for transitioning to renewable energy sources such as solar energy.

Regional tensions and geopolitical interests impact both the ongoing conflicts in the region and conditions for sustainable development. The spread of violent extremism and organised crime also has an impact on the situation.

Economic growth in the region is insufficient and economic integration is weak. The proportion of women in the labour force is very low and youth unemployment rates are among the highest in the world. In recent years, the proportion of people living in extreme poverty has increased sharply. Yemen accounts for an increasing share of the population living in extreme poverty in the region. The situation in parts of the MENA region has led to the world's largest refugee and migrant flows.

The root causes of both conflicts and poverty in the region are therefore numerous and interconnected.

The COVID-19 pandemic is expected to impact the region economically, socially and environmentally and to affect respect for human rights for a long time to come. Women and girls are particularly affected, and the pandemic has led to, among other things, an increase in gender-based violence and sexual abuse. Migrants, refugees and internally displaced people are often also particularly vulnerable as a result of the difficulties caused by the pandemic.

Regional partner organisations in the Middle East and North Africa are politically weak, regional integration is lacking and regional cooperation, on

the whole, is limited. Therefore, for political, economic and environmental reasons, stronger regional cooperation is justified and would improve the ability to address and respond to the poverty and development obstacles characterising many countries in the region. Greater regional dialogue may contribute to the exchange of experience between different country contexts to strengthen democratic development, strengthen respect for human rights and the rule of law, and improve gender equality. Regional cooperation is required to prevent, manage and resolve conflicts, including in Yemen, and to reduce poverty and promote inclusive sustainable development.

Yemen is marked by an ongoing and protracted armed conflict. UN-led efforts to reach a negotiated political solution continue. In many parts of the country, people are in acute need of assistance; according to the UN, Yemen has become the largest humanitarian crisis in the world. For large parts of the population, access to health care, food, water and sanitation, and critical supplies is extremely limited. The humanitarian crisis is exacerbated by the country's deep political, economic and social inequalities, weak institutions and lack of democracy. The conflict has compounded the structural problems in the country. Long-term initiatives to promote poverty reduction and food security, and to contribute to conditions for sustainable peace, are therefore essential. Marginalised groups, ethnic and religious minorities and internally displaced people are particularly vulnerable. The human rights situation is dire. Women's and girls' enjoyment of human rights is limited, and women and girls have been disproportionately affected by the conflict.

3. Activities

Sida will carry out, monitor and report on activities in accordance with the Government's guidelines for Swedish development cooperation and humanitarian aid strategies (UD2017/21053). The guidelines state that activities should be actively directed towards achieving the objectives and that the actual results should be monitored based on the objectives. The annual strategy report will be comprehensive and include a presentation, analysis and assessment of the results of the activities in relation to the defined objectives. Results information will be used for decision-making, learning and accountability, and for ensuring transparency for the general public. Monitoring will produce reliable and useful information about results in both the short term and the long term by using both qualitative and quantitative information, where possible. Results monitoring will primarily establish whether the activities have made a difference, how and for whom.

Based on the existing conditions, monitoring will determine the extent to which the development cooperation has made a difference.

Sweden's development cooperation contributes to sustainable development based on the 2030 Agenda, the financing for development commitments in the Addis Ababa Action Agenda and the Paris Agreement. The activities' contribution will be particularly relevant to the following sustainable development goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda: no poverty (SDG 1), zero hunger (SDG 2), gender equality (SDG 5), clean water and sanitation (SDG 6), affordable and clean energy (SDG 7), decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), industry, innovation and infrastructure (SDG 9), responsible consumption and production (SDG 12), climate action (SDG 13), life below water (SDG 14), life on land (SDG 15), peace, justice and strong institutions (SDG 16) and partnerships for the goals (SDG 17). Strategy reports to the Government will also include references to how activities contribute to implementation of the 2030 Agenda in relation to the strategy's priorities. Swedish development cooperation as a whole will contribute to poverty reduction in the Middle East and North Africa, better conditions for democratic development and respect for human rights, and increased gender equality.

Within the framework of this strategy, development cooperation will focus on regional or sub-regional activities that can be conducted in the twelve countries in the region eligible for official development assistance according to the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC).¹ Regional initiatives to address cross-border challenges may also apply to neighbouring countries that affect the strategy's implementation.

The regional approach may also mean that similar activities will be conducted in parallel in several countries, and that regional added value will be created through exchanges to promote inspiration and learning. This means that certain activities related to common challenges facing many of the countries in the region may also be conducted without necessarily being cross-border activities.

Transparency and accountability are key components of the implementation process and will permeate the activities. The importance of women's meaningful participation will also shape the strategy's implementation.

¹ Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Syria, Tunisia and Yemen.

Internally displaced people, refugees and migrants may be particularly vulnerable and will be included in this work. In addition, the participation of young people – particularly young women – will be highlighted, as will the role of civil society and the importance of a free and independent media.

Sweden's development cooperation will be relevant and effective. It will also contribute to laying the foundation for broader and more self-sustaining relations between Sweden and the countries in the region. Mobilisation of other financial resources should be explored. Cooperation with the Swedish resource base should also continue to be developed.

Synergies will be sought with the Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa and with the Folke Bernadotte Academy . In addition, other Swedish government agencies may play an important role, including by contributing their experience of intergovernmental regional collaboration.

Activities in the area of **democracy, human rights and the rule of law** will focus on the ability of civil society, the media and citizens to demand accountability; this perspective will also permeate the work related to public institutions. Women's meaningful participation is particularly important. Digital opportunities may also be harnessed in this area. The potential of young people's engagement will also be taken into account. Regional activities may be conducted through local, regional and international organisations. The role of democratic political parties to capture engagement and democratic movements, strengthen democratic institutions and demand accountability may be an important contribution.

Women's and girls' full enjoyment of human rights is central. Support to the region's women's rights organisations, networks and platforms is important for strengthening women's and girls' role in society and for combating discrimination. Strengthened capacity to work on **gender equality issues** in different types of regional institutions is a priority, including through increased digitalisation, gender equality analysis, political participation and sex- and age-disaggregated data.

The need for economic diversification in the region is substantial, and **inclusive and sustainable economic development** will be promoted; this may include a circular economy that improves the environment, limits climate impacts and creates green jobs. Simplified trade procedures, reduced

corruption and increased digitalisation may contribute to economic integration and growth. Sweden will work to strengthen conditions for free and fair trade, including access to domestic, regional and global markets. Partnerships with industry are an important part of the activities, as is the possibility of using guarantees to mobilise investment capital and promote innovation. Inclusive economic development and better conditions for entrepreneurship, **productive employment and decent work** will be promoted, and may include social dialogue. Activities will contribute to the increased economic empowerment of women, young people and marginalised groups, including refugees and migrants.

Activities will contribute to strengthening the capacity of regional institutions, civil society networks and platforms to manage **environmental and climate change impacts**. At the same time, activities will contribute to reduced climate impacts, for example, by promoting renewable energy, innovation, new technologies and collaboration with industry. The strategy's implementation will also contribute to the protection and restoration of **biodiversity** and its ecosystem services, and **sustainable management and use of natural resources**, including fresh water, transboundary water resources and the marine environment. Opportunities for dialogue and collaboration on sustainable use and management of common natural resources to promote broader and long-term cooperation between the countries in the region are particularly relevant. It would also be helpful to strengthen regional cooperation in the energy field.

Support to regional and sub-regional intergovernmental institutions and civil society actors will contribute to **peaceful and inclusive societies**. Both the women, peace and security agenda, and the youth, peace and security agenda will guide the strategy's implementation. Activities promoting peaceful and inclusive societies also contribute to poverty reduction. Conditions for inclusive dialogue and participation, respect for the rule of law and reduced illicit proliferation of small arms and light weapons are key to conflict prevention and peacebuilding. In this context, issues concerning violent extremism may also be taken into account.

Regarding bilateral activities in **Yemen**, it is particularly important to apply an integrated approach, linking long-term development cooperation with humanitarian assistance and peacebuilding. Activities will contribute to women's meaningful participation in inclusive processes, not least as support for UN peace efforts. Support will be directed at improving the situation of

marginalised groups and minorities and their opportunities for meaningful participation in societal development. Activities will contribute to increasing people's livelihood opportunities, including through food security and strengthened resilience. Women have been particularly affected by the conflict, and their situation and ability to participate will be highlighted, as will the situation of girls, boys and young people. Activities supporting civil society actors will also be prioritised. As the context is marked by considerable uncertainty and substantial risks and challenges associated with implementing and monitoring the activities, a conflict-sensitive and flexible approach is essential.

In addition to bilateral support, Yemen may be included in regional cooperation within the scope of this strategy, where appropriate, as set out above.

When supporting inclusive dialogues in the context of peace processes, both regionally and in Yemen, flexibility is essential, and Sida will have the preparedness to conduct particularly strategic, small-scale, targeted and rapid activities if necessary. For these areas, regular consultations and dialogue between the Government Offices (Ministry for Foreign Affairs) and Sida are of particular importance.

Sweden is one of few aid donors with a regional approach to the Middle East and North Africa. Where possible, Sweden will promote coherent and effective donor coordination in the region. In particular, cooperation with the EU will be sought, not least in relation to the EU's southern neighbourhood policy and in Yemen, including with EU joint programming, if possible. Collaboration will be sought with the Union for the Mediterranean on issues of common interest, and it may also be sought with the Anna Lindh Foundation.

Support via multilateral organisations must be consistent with Swedish priorities and approaches in cooperation with the multilateral organisations. Increased collaboration between actors in the UN system, in line with ongoing UN reforms, should be encouraged. Synergies and complementarities in cooperation with the multilateral system, including development and investments banks and the UN system, will be sought.

An integrated approach in all Swedish support to the region will be ensured. The linkages between long-term development cooperation, humanitarian aid

and peacebuilding will be harnessed. Synergies will be sought between the different strategy areas and with activities within the framework of other relevant strategies for Sweden's development cooperation and humanitarian aid. In the long run, activities should contribute to reducing dependency on humanitarian aid.