

Closing Event
60 years SDC in Latin America and the Caribbean
24 April 2024

Ambassador Arno Wicki

Introduction

Queridos amigos y amigas de las Américas, con gran alegría les damos la bienvenida a nuestro evento de cierre. Es un momento para celebrar, pero también nos llena un poco con tristeza. De toda manera, me alegro de que podamos pasar esta tarde juntos.

A warm welcome to our esteemed guests, partners, and colleagues. It's a pleasure to have you all here today as we reflect on our endeavors in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) spanning over half a century. Many of you have devoted your ideas, energy, and time to our projects in this region, and we extend our heartfelt gratitude for your contributions.

Today, we reflect on our experiences in Latin America and the Caribbean spanning over half a century, delving into our successes, challenges, and lessons learned. Throughout this period, SDC has left enduring legacies in countries like Peru, Bolivia, Honduras, and Nicaragua, establishing itself as a household name synonymous with development and progress. The evolution of SDC's programs in LAC vividly illustrates our approach and the transformation of our work over the decades.

A special acknowledgment to Beatrice Meyer and Virginie Poyetton for orchestrating this significant event, and gratitude to all participants for joining us today.

Closing our bilateral development programs

Closing our bilateral programs and offices in Latin America and the Caribbean during times of crisis has undoubtedly presented challenges. However, our dedicated teams have risen to the occasion, staying on track and, in certain countries, even surpassing our expectations. It has been crucial for us to ensure a responsible exit strategy, one that safeguards the accomplishments of our collective efforts.

Yet, let's be unequivocal: while the act of closing programs and offices may be a managerial task, the true measure of our impact lies in the difference we've made in the lives of individuals,

families, communities, and entire countries. Switzerland remains committed to maintaining its ties with the region, as it has done in the past, and will continue to strive to make a meaningful difference wherever feasible.

Now, let's delve deeper into why, where, and how SDC operated in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Why did SDC start working in the region over half a century ago?

Solidarity with the most marginalized and aiming to alleviate poverty has been a cornerstone of our mission in Latin America and the Caribbean. We've endeavored to leverage Swiss expertise in rural development, particularly in mountainous regions, where our know-how has proven valuable. Our engagement in the region has been further strengthened by our historical, cultural, and economic ties binding Switzerland and the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean.

Highlights: Where did we go – what did we do?

Our endeavors in Latin America and the Caribbean unfolded in three distinct waves, traversing from the Andes through Central America to the Caribbean. This journey led us from the highlands of Peru, Bolivia, and Ecuador to the coastal plains of Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador, and the Caribbean nations of Haiti and Cuba.

Throughout this journey, our focus remained on addressing critical issues affecting these regions. We dedicated significant efforts to initiatives such as Aguasan, aimed at enhancing water and sanitation access in Nicaragua and Peru. Additionally, our commitment to rural development was exemplified through programs like Postcosecha, implemented in Central America and Bolivia, alongside initiatives promoting local governance in Bolivia, Cuba, and Haiti. Moreover, recognizing the pressing challenges posed by climate change and disaster risk, we actively engaged in DRR and climate change resilience efforts across Peru and Central America.

What did we do well?

Firstly, we maintained proximity to the population and local authorities, fostering a participatory and trust-based approach. This involved a focus on local solutions that could be integrated into national-level policy processes, institutions, norms, and policies. Our strategy combined both territorial and systemic approaches, with an emphasis on fostering policy dialogue. Notably,

anchoring projects in civil society proved to be a crucial success factor, particularly in initiatives aimed at democratization and decentralization.

Secondly, we strove for Swiss quality and innovation. The technical expertise of our SDC staff played a pivotal role in ensuring the success of our cooperation efforts. Early on, we recognized the effectiveness of combining humanitarian and development instruments, as demonstrated in our work in Haiti.

Thirdly, we embraced a co-creation approach with a long-term perspective. This involved fostering local ownership and co-creation of projects, leading to a high level of local buy-in. For instance, the Rio Dipilto project in Nicaragua exemplified our commitment to long-term sustainability through local engagement. In all contexts, involving all relevant actors and maintaining a flexible, open-minded approach fostered trust and yielded lasting results. Our dialogue with governments on strategic priorities provided the necessary room for action, as evidenced by our work in Bolivia.

Lastly, we heavily invested in people, focusing on human capital development, capacity building, and education. In the water sector, empowering the local population was identified as a key strategy. This was particularly crucial in fragile contexts, where capacity building at the local level played a pivotal role in promoting resilience and sustainability. To translate empowerment into tangible outcomes, we worked closely with rural and indigenous communities, ensuring their active participation in the development process.

Lessons learned: What could we have done better?

In formulating a regional approach, it is crucial to address regional problems rather than solely responding to Swiss institutional priorities. For instance, in Central America, the regional program primarily aimed to limit the number of priority countries, often neglecting to adequately consider local needs and supranational institutions.

When starting economic development initiatives, it is crucial to select the appropriate approach. Inclusive economic development hinges on identifying the right entry point. For instance, if the primary goal of SDC's economic development projects is to increase income and job creation, then market-oriented strategies should be prioritized.

Water serves as a strategic entry point for addressing both climate change and governance issues. Given the projected escalation of global water problems in the coming years, leveraging "water" as a central theme can facilitate more systematic interventions in climate change, environmental sustainability, and governance. This elevates water to a transversal topic in

program implementation, offering a comprehensive approach to addressing interconnected challenges.

Investing in coherent data is essential for strategic decision-making and effective communication. Oftentimes, data was insufficient, inconsistent, or unreliable over time, hindering informed program management. Therefore, prioritizing evidence-based monitoring and evaluation, alongside robust knowledge management practices, is imperative for achieving results-oriented outcomes. Enhancing communication efforts to elucidate the rationale behind specific actions taken in a given country further contributes to transparency and accountability in development endeavors.

What does this mean for the future?

In a broader context, SDC recognizes that its efforts constitute only a fraction of the development processes at play. Therefore, our role must be approached with modesty, acknowledging the complexity of the challenges we seek to address.

Nonetheless, despite our modest contribution, SDC holds the capacity to leave a lasting positive impact on both individuals and countries, particularly focusing on vulnerable and marginalized groups whose needs often go unmet.

SDC is widely perceived as a neutral actor and an honest broker, endowed with the unique ability to engage in dialogue with all relevant parties. This position should be cherished and leveraged in our future endeavors.

Moreover, SDC's impact is significantly magnified when complemented by Swiss technical expertise, political advocacy, and an unwavering commitment to quality standards.

Drawing from our extensive experience and demonstrated success in sectors such as water management, disaster risk reduction (DRR), and local governance, SDC possesses a clear added value. This wealth of experience and expertise can be effectively applied in other regions to foster sustainable development.

In an era characterized by short-termism, it's imperative to underscore the importance of long-term, trustful engagement for achieving systemic and sustainable changes. Continuously communicating this fundamental concept to decision-makers and the general public is essential.

Turning our attention specifically to Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), we remain steadfast in our commitment to providing humanitarian support in Haiti, widely regarded as the

poorest country in the hemisphere. Despite the immense challenges posed by the context, Switzerland remains resolute in its determination to make a meaningful difference. Notably, Switzerland stands out as the sole donor with a presence in the disaster-stricken South of Haiti, employing a nexus and agile approach to address critical needs.

Additionally, Switzerland plays a pivotal role in the Colombian peace process, extending assistance to the most vulnerable communities and a substantial number of displaced persons. Our approach emphasizes a triple nexus/protection framework to ensure comprehensive support.

At the regional level, Switzerland is actively engaged in tackling environmental risks through support for projects in climate change, water management, and disaster risk reduction, underscoring our commitment to holistic and sustainable solutions.

Moreover, rapid response remains a cornerstone of our humanitarian efforts in LAC, as we provide aid in the aftermath of natural disasters and armed conflicts, demonstrating our unwavering commitment to assisting those in need.

In closing, I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to each and every one of you for your unwavering dedication, passion, and commitment to our collective mission in Latin America and the Caribbean.

I wish you an excellent event.

Thank you for your attention.