



Event Report: Celebrating 60 years of Swiss Cooperation with Latin America & the Caribbean





Introduction

The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) recently marked a significant milestone in its relationship with the Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) region. Following a parliamentary resolution, SDC has undertaken a responsible and sustainable phase-out of its bilateral cooperation. A closing event on April 24 2024 in Zollikofen, organised by SDC's LAC Section with support from cinfo, served as a forum to recognise contributions from Swiss partners, reflect on lessons learnt, and discuss future directions for international cooperation in the region. The event, attended by 120 participants including directors and programme managers from Swiss partner organisations, private sector and members of academia, provided valuable insights and strategic considerations for SDC's ongoing involvement in Latin America and its wider impact on global development initiatives.



Event overview

The event began with an introduction from the Head of the Asia-LAC Division, Ambassador Arno Wicki, which led to a presentation of the Historic Impact Capitalisation of SDC's bilateral cooperation in LAC by Jan Prothmann (Team leader, GFA Consulting Group).



Both parties made it clear that the SDC's withdrawal was not an easy process and that it was crucial to examine what had worked well in the LAC region and where there were important lessons learnt for future projects in the region and in other contexts. The fact that the SDC worked with long-term plans, high competent local staff and active participation of local actors was highlighted as a crucial value added. The SDC's multi-stakeholder approach, the combination of territorial and systemic strategies with political dialogue, are other important success factors. It was also emphasised that the translation of successful approaches into norms and policies, as well as long-



term, confidence-building projects, are essential for sustainability. The event also featured testimonials from Félix Hernández (Beneficiary of the Postcosecha project), Peter Bischof (Former Head of Division Latin America & the Caribbean) and Mauricio Peñalba Nissen (National Programme Officer, Nicaragua), who jointly stated that a willingness to learn, maintaining a balance between flexibility and stability and investing in capacity building are key elements of Swiss development cooperation.

The presentations set the stage for thematic workshops, the main outcomes of which are summarised in the following pages.

The day was rounded off by a panel discussion with the following speakers:

- Patricia Danzi - Ambassador and Director General, SDC
- Felix Gnehm - Vice President, Alliance Sud
- Petra Heid - Head of Sustainability, HALBA
- Christopher Humphrey - Senior Scientist, Nadel/ETH Zurich
- Sophie Orr - Regional Director for the Americas, ICRC

The discussion, facilitated by NZZ-Journalist Nicole Anliker, focused on the evolving landscape of development in Latin America and the Caribbean and Switzerland's role within it. It stressed the necessity of crafting a new narrative for the region, one driven by local leadership. At a time of geopolitical instability and threats to democracy around the world, Switzerland can find like-minded partners in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Speakers highlighted the importance of maintaining relationships and networks despite the reduced funding, as well as the role of the private sector in fostering sustainable development. There was consensus on the need for Switzerland to remain engaged in Latin America and the Caribbean

through various channels: humanitarian assistance, the presence of Swiss NGOs, Switzerland's influence within the multilateral development banks and UN, private sector investment, the activities of other government agencies such as SECO, and through Swiss embassies.

As Patricia Danzi said, the SDC will continue to be present, though not in the driver's seat. Overall, the dialogue emphasised the importance of sustained



engagement, strong partnerships, and understanding local contexts in driving meaningful development in Latin America and the Caribbean.



In conjunction with the event, an exhibition featuring photographs from the book "Miradas" was set up. It showcased ten local SDC employees, each



accompanied by a person of their choice, be it partners or and beneficiaries.

Workshops outcomes

The workshops were a cornerstone of the event. The open space method allowed attendees to participate in discussions according to their interests and the experiences. The workshops aimed to build on past experiences of sustainable cooperation, identified as part of SDC's capitalisation's processes, to identify challenges and allow partners active in Latin America

and the Caribbean to reflect on lessons learnt and comment out of their experience.

At the heart of these discussions was a shared commitment to ensuring the longevity of development projects and partnerships. This report presents the findings and recommendations of the joint dialogue.

Technical and vocational education and training (TVET)

The discussion focused on the long-term impact of vocational training, highlighting the difficulty of measuring lasting effects within countries due to structural changes. The three main lessons learnt are:



- **Understanding and Integrating Local Contexts:** The effectiveness of vocational education programs hinges on a deep understanding of the country-specific contexts and adapting strategies accordingly. This allows for more impactful interventions.
- **Building Robust Partnerships:** Strong, multi-layered partnerships, particularly involving the private sector, are crucial. These



relationships enhance trainees' employability and contribute significantly to the robustness of vocational education systems.

- **Adapting to Political and Policy Changes:** Aligning project objectives with national policies and priorities ensures that interventions are not only relevant but also positioned to exploit systemic opportunities for broader impact.

Additional Insights:

- **Private Sector Engagement:** Vocational training projects should align with private sector development, especially in centralised countries. Effective dual training systems require an organised and



representative private sector to scale up.

- **Scaling Up Training Programs:** Make vocational training more attractive by focusing on profitable trades. Ensure all system components function well, including public-private dialogue, needs

analysis, responsive training programs, and improved trainer education.

- **Role of Swiss NGOs:** Swiss NGOs have unique access in countries, complementing SDC efforts and contributing to a systemic approach. Continue dialogue through embassies, engaging colleagues in political dialogues for enhanced coordination.
- **Gender Considerations:** Forcing women into traditionally male-dominated trades won't increase female participation. Ensure non-gendered, lucrative trades are accessible to women, preventing male domination and promoting good remuneration. Continuous information and awareness efforts are essential.

Gender

Three lessons learnt identified through the Gender capitalisation process:

- There is **always potential for change**, even in fragile and authoritarian contexts. Finding the right approach is the key.
- To achieve gender equality, it is important to **combine** a *gender empowerment* approach with a *gender transformative* approach.
- **A change of culture** and mindset within the implementing organisations should be a part of the projects.

Restitution from the discussions:

What actions will SDC undertake with the capitalisation report?

- Design processes to disseminate the findings of the report and engage partners in LAC (embassies, NGOs, etc.) through active dialogues;



- Ensure ongoing contact and capacity building with partners;
- Gain political support through Swiss embassies to integrate these strategies effectively into policies, enhancing their impact through advocacy.



Partner Engagement:

- Encourage partners to request information on SDC's programmes/projects, and to share ideas and lessons learnt;
- Use a concise communication tool (e.g., a 1-2 page flyer with pictures) to facilitate this process;
- Provide partners with practical tools and resources to aid implementation.

Application of lessons learnt:

Building trust and creating a safe space for engagement is crucial, necessitating long-term commitment;

- Gradually establish role models is a good strategy, such as through initiatives like SQUAT in Haiti and the inclusion of the first female construction workers;
- Address the challenge of integrating entire families, utilising insights from the capitalisation process.

Disaster Risk Reduction / Climate Change Adaptation

The SDC looks back at 25 years of DRR / CCA that were initiated by a major

natural disaster in Central America with hurricane Mitch. The group is reminded of the aim of DRR / CCA: to save lives and to reduce losses and damage. Several challenges for sustainability were identified in the DRR capitalisation process, as well as good practices like mid/long-term planning or developing practical and adapted instruments and methodologies.





Main take-aways:

- The starting point of DRR / CC adaptation is generally a disaster (especially when DRR starts with humanitarian aid financing). Use this **window of opportunity** in other contexts as well.
- Look for entry points for **mainstreaming DRR into development**, such as in WASH and governance programs.
- DRR / CCA measures must be attractive by choosing multi-purpose measures combining **short-term and long-term** benefits.
- There is potential to use the **experience capitalisation** further.

Local risk governance in a context of high turnover:

- Capacity building is a key investment; it is never lost because trained people will still use their know-how;
- Another focus should be on tools, guidelines and instruments adapted to the local level;



- Schools are an entry point, starting with preparedness for emergencies, but also for DRR / CCA in general.

Capacity building at a systemic level

- Integrating DRR/CCA in other sectors helps addressing them from different angles;
- Peer training (e.g. “from farmer to farmer”) is a promising option.
- Topping up salaries may be a short-term option (albeit not sustainable); pooling of capable resources between several municipalities can be envisaged as a more sustainable option.
- The different levels need to be prepared / trained to work together (including, if needed, working on the legal framework).
- Working with indigenous groups has great potential for sustainability. We should strengthen their capacities and build on their knowledge.



Gender and minorities and other disadvantaged groups in DRR / CCA :

- The case for the involvement of women and minorities needs to be made (in particular through economic considerations, but also insights from past disasters).



- This means understanding not only hazards but, above all, also the vulnerabilities of the different groups (risks for different groups).
- We should identify champions (both technical and political) – at different levels (from communities to ministries; also in NGOs).
- Work has to be done on the risk perception (understand the risk).
- Finally, prioritise budget and quota.

Local Development

Main take- aways:

Respect and Trust Building:

- Be humble and honest about achievable outcomes, using a **contribution logic** rather than attribution for program results;
- Engage in **self-reflection** and criticism, focusing on truly listening to local people and co-creating programs;
- **Trust local** ideas and proposals, adapting risk management approaches to support local ways of doing things;

Multi-Stakeholder Approach:

- Implement a multi-stakeholder approach to comply with CSPM and "do no harm" principles, especially in fragile contexts;
- Consider existing power dynamics and involve all relevant stakeholders, recognising that these may change over time;
- Foster empowerment and long-term engagement to build trust and credibility for national policy work.

Localisation Management:

- Use flexible and adaptive management and funding, particularly in authoritarian and centralised systems;
- Focus on co-financing, capacity building, and compliance with legal frameworks to support sustainable development;
- Embed localisation as a principle, reflect on sustainability from the start, and ensure honest assessment of activities' long-term viability.

Closing words

The SDC's closing event was a decisive moment of transition. Ending long-standing partnerships brings a sense of loss, yet it also paves the way for new methods of engagement. Recognising that there's no perfect time for withdrawal, the focus was on managing the transition effectively for everyone involved. Switzerland will continue its involvement in the region, albeit in a different capacity, supporting local initiatives and responding to humanitarian challenges. Lessons from past efforts will guide future strategies, emphasising the importance of trust-building, adaptability, and collaboration. The event also provided a valuable opportunity for participants to learn and reflect on best practices, exchange ideas and gather information.

