

Chapter 6

Certainty for Sale?: A Historic Exposé on the Role of External Experts in Development Aid 1960s–2020s

Ever since the field of public development aid was established in the 1960s, external experts have been extensively employed in aid organizations' attempts to respond to the various uncertainties of aid operations. This chapter offers a closer look at what the Swedish development aid agency, the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida), has required of external experts, and how the content and rituals of these contracted expert deals have contributed – or not – to perceptions of trust and certainty.

In essence, and following our reasoning in Chapter 4, on the management dreams of simplifying the complex and controlling the future, the gap between these ideals and the often messy and uncertain practices of development aid projects stirs the demand for external professional services. Considering the uncertainty at hand, it is therefore understandable that decision-makers need the support of several different partners to deal with these complex issues (Kipping, 2002).

In this chapter, we present a historic exposé on the role of experts in development aid relations, in aid organizations' attempts to reduce and cope with uncertainty. External experts have been contracted by aid organizations for a number of reasons and to

Obsessive Measurement Disorder or Pragmatic Bureaucracy?, 89–116



Copyright © 2024 Susanna Alexius and Janet Vähämäki.

Published by Emerald Publishing Limited. This work is published under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) licence. Anyone may reproduce, distribute, translate and create derivative works of this book (for both commercial and non-commercial purposes), subject to full attribution to the original publication and authors. The full terms of this licence may be seen at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode>.

doi:[10.1108/978-1-80117-374-220241006](https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-80117-374-220241006)

help reduce all three kinds of uncertainties described in Chapter 2.¹ These experts have been hired to support the bureaucrats of the organization in the donor role in assessing who should receive aid funds, but also to support the bureaucrats of the organization in the recipient role in accessing funds or helping to implement projects (Curtis, 2004). And the external experts have not only been consulted for their knowledge but also for their moral support to individual decision-makers and as agents of legitimation. Furusten and Werr (2005) argue that external experts often “deal with confidence,” in the sense that their clients value and demand not only expert services and advice but also the interpersonal trust that develops between individual consultants and their client representatives. As our examples below show, external experts have often also been used as mediators between two organizations in a donor–recipient relationship. And due to the scale of the aid system and the complexity of the mission, aid bureaucrats need to collaborate not only with one another but also with external experts to get the job done, as Pekka Seppälä from the Ministry for Foreign Affairs in Finland argues:

The bureaucrat has only a limited role in actually addressing the problem. The role of the development bureaucrat is limited to defining the terms of reference [ToR, i.e. a job description] for a team of consultants who are actually tasked to look at the problem in more detail. [...] A single bureaucrat is powerless if she is unable to command consultants and colleagues to follow the level of detail.

¹That is, external experts have been contracted: (a) to prepare or assess a project or a financial proposal *before* the funding decision or to conduct *specific analyses* or studies concerning, for example, how a problem and its conditions will change in a certain country, portfolio, or with respect to a thematic issue – all in order to reduce *uncertainties of state*; (b) to support implementation *during* a project, to reduce *uncertainties of response* concerning the proper course of action to take next; and (c) to evaluate a project *after* it has been completed, to reduce *uncertainties of effect*.

As explained in this quote, a key insight into the role of external experts in the aid field is that aid bureaucrats seldom manage to do the job alone but are highly dependent, not only on colleagues but also on a web of external experts. However, being highly dependent on external experts can also imply difficulties. Recent literature on external experts has argued that their expertise has become increasingly influential in the formulation and implementation of policies aimed at restructuring public services (Lapsley & Oldfield, 2001; Saint-Martin, 1998), typically according to the ethos of commercial professionalism (Furusten, 2023, 2003).

A common argument in this more critical literature is that external experts have moved closer and, in fact, too close to public-sector decision-making fora, and that these experts have come to challenge conventional forms of bureaucratic and democratic decision-making within the public sector, which in turn has decreased the levels of internal knowledge and competencies in public-sector organizations. It has been argued that consultants have increasingly replaced civil servants, and even politicians, in terms of both knowledge and organizational memory and control, which has led to consultants having increased power in politics, public governance, and public-sector practices (Grafström et al., 2021; Ylönen & Kuusela, 2018). This development has been described as “consultocracy” (Kirkpatrick et al., 2019; Ylönen & Kuusela, 2018). Research on consultocracy is critical of external experts being used not merely for planning and implementing of political reforms but increasingly also for support at the heart of decision-making processes, albeit often in more informal ways, making the experts’ involvement less transparent and harder to evaluate from the outside (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006; Garsten et al., 2015; Kirkpatrick et al., 2019). Thus, external experts are not only trusted and praised; they are also extensively discussed, evaluated, and criticized. This negative perspective is important, and our historic exposé reveals that through the years, dealing with external experts in the field of development aid has also been criticized for bringing about confusion, mistrust, and more uncertainty, rather than clarity, trust, and certainty, as typically intended. When worst comes to worst, this pattern has become a self-enforcing vicious circle: external experts bring about uncertainty that calls for more external experts, which brings about more

uncertainty, which calls for even more external experts, etc. And sometimes, the unceasing strive for certainty – by way of “proper” external experts and their “proper” processes and technologies – has run amok, increasing the risk of OMD.

Following this general introduction, we will now begin our historic exposé on how external experts have been used in an attempt to reduce uncertainty, and how these uncertainty-reducing attempts have in turn created new uncertainties in Swedish development aid since the 1960s. Our focus here is primarily externally procured experts, but we also provide an account of the views and practices of internally sourced experts – with an emphasis on Sida.

We have divided our empirical account into three main eras: (1) 1960s–1990s: the Quick-fix Implementer Era, (2) 1990s–2005: the Collaborative Turn Era, and (3) 2005–2020s: the Proper Organization Proxy (POP) Era. The material that forms the basis for this chapter consists of both documents (archived project applications, decision statements, correspondence, memos, etc.) and interviews gathered in previous research on the history of Swedish aid (Vähämäki, 2017). The main method used to analyze the material has been process tracing (Collier, 2011), where researchers test different assumptions in an attempt to unfold why a specific event or change happened (see also Methods appendix). Aware of the complex sources of institutional and organizational change, we have sought to identify a post hoc pattern of shifting views on the contestation of aid as well as concerns the demand for external expertise. Our primary focus has been the meso level of market relations, narrowing the scope to Sida’s role as a buyer of external expertise, including the micro level of its aid funding decisions.

Due to the gradual nature of organizational change and the slow sedimentation of previous reform ideas, the borders of the identified eras are actually a little more “fuzzy around the edges” than the standard representation of a neat table may allow for, but to the best of our knowledge and available data, we conclude that at about these transformative moments (1990, 2005), a new dominant scheme on the view and use of external expertise did indeed take hold as new “rules of the game” became the norm. Rather than sudden shifts, our exploratory retrospect case analysis approach has enabled us to identify gradual change in the perception of

contestation and uncertainties at hand which in turn have influenced new ways of contracting and co-creating with external experts.

1960s–1990s: The Quick-Fix Implementer Era

During this first era, achieving the goals of development aid – “to raise the living standards of poor people” (Gov 1962, p. 100) – proved to be much more complex than originally anticipated. Employing external expertise in the form of so-called “technical assistance” was seen as an attractive quick-fix solution to development aid problems. However, the assistance from these external experts came to be criticized for increasing the uncertainty by creating even more problems, partly due to the experts not possessing the needed competencies. This criticism in turn led to an increased use of “evaluation consultants” contracted to increase certainty by reporting the effects of aid and so-called “close consultants” that were to work even more closely with aid bureaucrats in order to support decision-making processes. Below, we describe some of the key happenings from this time period.

When SIDA – the Swedish International Development Authority – was founded in 1965, it quickly came to be seen as Sweden’s main expert organization in international development aid.² At that time, the authority’s staff was largely comprised of thematic experts in charge of delivering aid funds to development projects quickly. It is clear from documentation from the time that urgency to combat poverty in the world was a key concern. For example, Ernst Michanek, SIDA’s first director-general, stated that the agency had “ten years to steer development in a new direction” (Michanek, 1964). And importantly, there was public support for and optimism about the task, which was indeed perceived as possible, by means of development aid.

At that time, there were two main types of external experts engaged. The first were external experts that could be contracted to support SIDA in its own expert role. The argument for contracting these

²In 1995, the original Swedish International Development Authority (SIDA) was merged with four other agencies to form the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida).

experts was capacity constraints, i.e., that SIDA itself did not have enough staff with the right competencies to undertake certain tasks, such as administration, recruitment, documentation, thematic overviews and project control, or to serve as individual advisors to SIDA staff (RRV, 1983). The second type of external experts needed were those who could help with the implementation of aid projects in the recipient countries. This second type category of experts was most often described as “technical assistance” in “people-oriented programs designed to transfer knowledge through education, training, and research” (Loomis, 1968, p. 1330). The focus here was on changing the behavior of individuals and institutions in “developing” countries (Loomis, 1968, p. 1330). A division of the world had thereby been made into “developed” (i.e., prosperous, scientifically and technologically leading) nations and “underdeveloped” (i.e., deficient, unprogressive) nations that faced conditions of misery, where the latter were depicted as unable to end the suffering of their people without the knowledge and skills of the former. Competencies identified as critical were those of teachers, vocational instructors, adult learning educators, and family planners, but also engineers.³ Interestingly, it was simply assumed by Swedish politicians and aid bureaucrats that these experts ought to be Swedes, and that it would be most efficient for the aid if they were hired by SIDA (RRV, 1983). As a result of this powerful framing of needs, in the decades that followed, large education and training programs were established in Sweden to educate external experts, as part of the Swedish resource base, to undertake various tasks in development aid (Ewald & Wohlgemuth, 2022).

It was not long, however, before public aid and the use of external experts for technical assistance began to draw criticism. And, as some aid projects were described as “failures,” the realization that the task at hand was not as simple as initially envisioned emerged. In fact, great uncertainties arose about the effects of aid. In both international articles (Loomis, 1968; Jolly, 1989) and formal evaluations (RRV, 1983; Forss et al., 1988), criticism was raised regarding the fundamental set-up behind technical assistance

³From the Swedish *folkbildare*, a concept connected with Sweden’s community-based Folk high schools, a study association system with a long history of liberal and popular adult education.

where individual people were being contracted by organizations in the donor role with the intention that this would support the process of modernization in poor, recipient countries. Loomis (1968), for example, argued that the very presence of technical assistance implied a continuation of inadequacy and inferiority on the part of the recipient, which in turn led to resentment, and in the end implied a reduced or nullified effect of the aid received.

The Swedish national audit office/Riksrevisionsverket (RRV) raised the criticism that external experts had too “narrow” an understanding of the development problems, which posed the risk of making problems at hand worse, hence a critique that drew attention to the great uncertainties of state at hand (see Chapter 2) (RRV, 1983). A Nordic evaluation of the technical assistance went as far as to argue that “many aid projects have a negative impact on institutional development,” suggesting that projects often ended up being run by the technical assistance people, which created oversized organizations that were not sustainable without aid funding (Forss et al., 1988, p. ii). The evaluation furthermore argued that the transfer of knowledge had been “nonexistent or crippled” and questioned whether there had actually been a need for foreign personnel (Forss et al., 1988, p. 1).

Yet another point criticized had to do with the power gained by the external experts over development politics and project implementation. RRV’s 1983 audit argued that project documentation and assessments were sometimes produced entirely by external experts, with no involvement of internal SIDA staff. According to the audit, this meant that the external experts could often “form the projects to suit their own companies” (RRV, 1983, p. 26). Tendencies toward what our contemporary criticism of consultancy calls “consultocracy” (Ylönen & Kuusela, 2019) were thus identified and found fault with early on in the field of development aid.

The hope of finding a simple solution (knowledge transfer through technical assistance) to the problem of world poverty (which in 1960s was deemed as an “easy, quick fix”) had thus proven to be riddled with uncertainties. And although the quick-fix framing was an ideological misconception, blame was increasingly placed on external experts for their “failure” to deliver a simple, quick solution. Somewhat paradoxically, however, the uncertainties and failures that had come to light concerning the use of

external experts soon increased the demand for a third kind of external expertise: evaluators. Guidelines for evaluation of international development assistance had been developed as early as 1959 by UNESCO and a few years later by USAID (1965). It was not until the 1980s, two decades after first being implemented, however, that the field experienced an “explosion of interest” in aid evaluation (Lancaster, 2008). The large organizations in the donor role set up evaluation units, and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) established the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) Expert Group on Aid Evaluation (Cracknell, 1988). There was also increased pressure on organizations in the donor role to take responsibility for aid funding actually producing “results.” Clearly, the criticized short-sightedness of the early aid projects had led SIDA to seek to improve administrative routines that would ensure more long-term thinking.

In addition to these three kinds of external experts (in capacity support, technical assistance and evaluation), the criticism led to a surge in one other “expert solution.” During this era, there was also a great deal of criticism against SIDA for not following proper procurement rules in its contracting. At this time, one-person companies were typically procured directly, with neither a bidding process nor evaluation criteria. It was therefore recommended that SIDA organize its procurement processes better, to gain a better overview of the consultancy competencies being contracted and to ensure that the consultants hired actually possessed the right knowledge and skills “with broader perspectives” – as opposed to the existing, criticized “narrow” perspective on development assistance (RRV, 1983). This was a bit ambivalent considering the consultocracy critique, and RRV’s recommendation at the time was that SIDA should increase its own internal competency by procuring what was referred to as long-term “close consultants” (“närkonsulter”) to assist in “complicated cases of expertise procurement” and other specialist tasks (RRV, 1983, p. 6).⁴ The view was thus that, as long as external experts were procured correctly, the close working relationship between these external experts and SIDA decision-makers was a good thing for the aid processes.

⁴From the Swedish *närkonsulter*.

1990s–2000s: The Collaborative Turn Era

During the next era of uncertainty responses, deeper knowledge and thematic competence, preferably founded on science, was lauded, and many aid programs were built up to support those values. Closeness, informal relations and participatory approaches with different actors, including external experts, were valued for building competence and to help tackle the uncertainties of the complex global development goals. However, the close relations between external experts and organizations in the donor role were again criticized for increasing inequality and uncertainty. We describe some of the main events and trends of this era below.

With the 1990s came an even more complex view of development aid. Aid organizations now increasingly sought to influence developing countries' macro-economic policies and to support the building of strong local institutions. At the same time, more bottom-up and participatory approaches were favored. Aid projects now often had more abstract goals that were difficult to verify objectively, such as the goals of "increased equity and social transformation" or "increased capacity-building" (Hintjens, 1999). This collaborative turn in international development also made the constitution of professional or expert identities more complex since experts of participatory programs now had to downplay or even conceal their own expertise, agency, and practical role in program delivery, to match the authorized view of them as "facilitators" or "catalysts" of community action and local knowledge (Mosse, 2007).

In 1995, SIDA was merged with four other government agencies and became "Sida," giving the agency a strengthened role as an expert organization (as well as the orthographic change to fewer capital letters). As recommended by the 1983 audit, and justified by proper procurement and efficiency and capacity development arguments, Sida had now created a system of "close consultants." Thus, each thematic unit and division at Sida had a group of consultants attached to its operations. Every program officer could thus have a couple of "close consultants" connected to their operations. And while many of these close consultants had expertise in the particular thematic fields, they often ended up doing any kind of administrative task, such as conducting assessments of aid

projects and decision-making processes in the agency. In addition to working closely with the consultants, Sida had many other close collaborations within the so-called Swedish “resource base,” defined as consisting of Swedish academia, external experts, the private sector, and civil society. It was seen as important to build up competence in development among a wider set of Swedish actors (Ewald & Wohlgemuth, 2022). Closeness and continuous interaction with close consultants and other actors in society was thus seen as important for competence development and, in the longer perspective, Sweden’s ability to deal with the uncertainties of state in the field of development aid.

In contrast to the discussions on the need for closeness during implementation of aid projects, however, during the 1990s, there was also an ongoing discussion and attempts to “organize independency” in the assessment of aid results. It was claimed that evaluations should be conducted not by the actors participating in implementation but by a separate body outside Sida (SOU, 1993, p. 1; RRV, 1991). As a consequence of these discussions, two attempts were made to set up such independent bodies: SASDA – the Secretariat for Analysis of Swedish Development Assistance, launched in 1992 (Gov 1992, p. 59) and shuttered in 1993 and the slightly longer-running EGDI – the Expert Group on Development Issues, launched in 1998 and discontinued in 2007.

The official reason for shutting down both of these bodies was a lack of resources, but there were also claims relating to SASDA and EGDI having difficulty actually showing results of aid (RR 1998/99, p. 43). The final report from SASDA, for example, stated that “the presently available statistics on Swedish aid are not suitable for studies and analyses of the effectiveness of aid” and suggested that more efforts were needed to further specify the requirements concerning the reporting of results (Ds, 1994, pp. 58, 137). Thus, the body itself argued that a more substantial set-up for reporting results was needed for it to be able to properly evaluate the results and effectiveness of aid. The politicians of the day, however, seem to have believed that the independent bodies did a poor job since they were unable to come up with precise answers to how, whether, and what type of aid led to results. Hence, both SASDA and EGDI were born of a quest to improve the analysis of “results” and both died of the difficulty of doing so.

In the periods during which Sweden has lacked independent evaluation bodies, fewer evaluations that take a wider perspective on topics have been conducted. Nevertheless, due to the fact that evaluations were now systematically conducted on all aid projects, as well as aid portfolios and country, sectorial and thematic approaches, the field had now become perhaps the world's most evaluated policy field (Vähämäki et al., 2011). Another concern during this era was that criticism was once again raised of the fact that external experts seemed to increase the inequality in power relations between organizations in the donor role and organizations in the recipient role. This criticism foremost addressed the idea of the continued use of external experts as technical assistance. William Easterly, a former World Bank economist and later professor at New York University, for example, published a book provocatively entitled *The Tyranny of Experts: Economists, Dictators, and the Forgotten Rights of the Poor*, in which he criticized aid agencies for perpetuating the “technocratic illusion” that external expertise would solve the problems of the developing world. According to him, the advice of external experts had helped to oppress people rather than to free them from poverty (Easterly, 2016).

In a critical report from international nongovernmental organization (NGO) ActionAid, it was argued that external experts, in the form of technical assistance, absorbed USD 19 billion of aid in 2004, a quarter of global aid flows. ActionAid argued that this assistance was “phantom aid” imposed by donors as a “soft lever to police and direct the policy agendas of developing country governments.” The report further argued that it was an open secret that “much of the current spending is ineffective, over-priced, donor-driven and based on a failed development model” (Greenhill, 2006, p. 4). In a similar vein, Koch and Weingart (2016) penned an exposé of various studies on external experts, arguing that most studies had found that, in the context of aid, external experts in the form of technical assistance largely fail to achieve the objective of increasing the capacity of organizations in the recipient role to an extent that would render them independent from outside assistance. As a result, Koch and Weingart argued, recipient governments run the risk of ending up in a perpetual cycle of being advised by external experts who potentially (and illegitimately) gain significant influence in the policy space (Koch & Weingart, 2016). Thus, once again, the critique of

consultocracy and of external experts contributing to increased (rather than reduced) uncertainty was aired. A global discussion arose also regarding the need to move on from technical assistance (a support form increasingly seen as imposed by donors) to supporting programs owned and operated by developing countries (Williams et al., 2003), the idea being that external experts ought instead to be procured by the aid recipients, and that they should support capacity building in the recipient countries (Williams et al., 2003).

To sum up – during the Collaborative Turn Era, uncertainty of state (see Chapter 2) was seen as something to be tackled in close collaboration with internal and external experts. External experts were still procured to assist in implementation of aid projects. Close consultants were contracted to support aid organizations in their donor role. The need for independence, and for maintaining an arm’s length perspective, became a matter for external evaluations and evaluators. However, the close relations between external experts and organizations in the donor role were once again heavily criticized for increasing inequality and uncertainty.

2000–2020s: The POP Era

In this era, the aid landscape has become even more complex, with an increasing number of actors, including more involvement from the private sector. The ideal role of aid in this current era is more often described as that of a catalyst since it has been generally more accepted that aid in itself cannot solve the still large and increasing development problems (MFA, 2003). As described in Chapter 5, the recurring criticism or suspicion that aid is not effective enough has put pressure on Sida and other aid organizations to become “proper organizations” that focus primarily on structures and procedures, on doing things the right way and by the book. This development has also entailed a shift in power internally at the agency, with an increased emphasis on the expertise provided by in-house controllers and lawyers, with thematic experts increasingly seen as the new support functions. Increased internationalization and the aid effectiveness agenda have also meant a smaller space for Swedish external experts in foreign aid projects.

Severe criticism from external audits, government, and the media regarding ineffective and inefficient aid delivery led to drastic changes and several reorganizations in Swedish aid from 2006 onward. Sida received a new mandate in which its task was reduced from that of an expert organization to its main role being that of a financier and controller of development aid projects (Gov, 2010 ta bort b). In 2012, with a new director-general, board and changed leadership in place, Sida consequently launched a management process based on the assumption that getting it right and complying with all legal and external requirements would lead to improved results.⁵ Changes made due to budget and through several reorganizations implied a drastically reduced number of thematic experts at the agency and an increased number of in-house generalists such as controllers and lawyers instead. The latter experts (i.e., generalists) were seen as crucial in order to attain consent (i.e., “no objection”) in decision-making at different stages of aid project management. In practice, the new process thus meant a shift of power from program officers to controllers and legal experts. Procurement rules were tightened up, and external experts were now contracted mainly through larger bidding processes. Within Sida, the legal department had gained more power and streamlined both the direct procurement rules and the framework agreements by establishing budget ceilings, more specifications, etc., all in the aim of becoming a “proper organization,” more like other government agencies. Alongside these governance reforms, there was a gradual shift in organizational culture within Sida toward an increased focus on “doing things right” and “by the book.” All of this brought the closeness to external experts into question once again, which in turn implied several new anti-corruption measures, such as establishing an external whistle-blower function and imposing anti-bribery rules. For Sida employees, this meant it was no longer considered appropriate to be invited to lunches and dinners by external experts and, consequently, that informal

⁵Decision concerning contribution management process, including new rule for managing contributions, implementation guide and templates, new quality assurance of contribution management, and establishment of a management organization for aid processes. 2012-03-07/03079.

communication channels were reduced. Clearly, the fear of nepotism and corruption had increased.

Internationally, measures were taken to decrease the power of organizations in the donor role and to strengthen organizations in the recipient role. The international aid effectiveness debate was coordinated by OECD DAC, and the advent of the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness in 2005 implied that donors were no longer to run projects and contract their own external experts and project implementation units but rather they were to align operations with larger development country procurement and financial management systems. Ideally, donor funds should be pooled or directly channeled through developing country systems to large sector or national programs. For external experts, this meant that the external expert market became more international and situated in the developing countries, which in turn required larger set-ups by the consultancy companies.

All of these changes led to external experts being contracted to a lesser extent. “Close consultants” were no longer procured due to the fear of nepotism. Many smaller Swedish consulting companies struggled to survive and mid-sized firms had to merge their businesses. Swedish Consultants, a network formed by some of the larger Swedish consultancies (SIPU, Neptunia Development, Niras, WSP International, and InDevelop), expressed their discontent with the situation and how their competence was handled in a 2012 opinion piece published on the Swedish Development Forum (FUF) website:

Consultants are the most cost-effective players in development assistance and it is high time that we are recognized and regarded as an obvious partner in Swedish development assistance as well. Despite all the talk about the importance of the private sector, the consulting companies were not consulted when the development assistance policy platform was sent for consultation earlier this year. We exist and we want to contribute our experiences to results-oriented Swedish development assistance.⁶

⁶<https://fuf.se/en/magasin/vi-garanterar-resultat/>

Somewhat symptomatically, however, the Swedish Consultants network was not long-lived either. But, as we will show below, the new set-up and stricter view of external experts also created new uncertainties that in turn called for new experts.

Generalists Are Not Enough

In our interviews with aid consultants over the past decade, we have found a mission drift in the sense that the typical aid bureaucrat today is expected to be more of a generalist and less of a specialist on specific thematic topics. One program officer interviewed expressed it as follows:

I feel like I've become more and more of a generalist in my professional practice. Everyone should know everything. I'm getting bad at a lot of things. I'm maybe getting less good at what I'm actually best at, or where I have a lot of expertise.

Nevertheless, a general opinion among our interviewees is that additional, specific competence is still needed in the current era, at least to some degree, for proper decision-making. From the mid-2000s, after decreasing the number of thematic experts employed, Sida switched to procuring large framework agreements with external experts for different thematic topics. Today, at the time of writing, Sida uses nine such external "help desks," which cater to a range of specific topics.⁷ The fact that there are nine help desks shows that the complexity of the task has increased, as well as that Sida still needs external support to reduce uncertainty in its decision-making. The help desks are typically procured to assist Sida in assessment and analysis of the different perspectives, and often act as go-betweens in instances where Sida bureaucrats are uncertain about whether a thematic topic has been sufficiently

⁷The areas covered are: Gender Equality, Democracy, and Human Rights; Peace and Human Security; Environment and Climate Change; Education; Agriculture; Employment and Market Development; Anti-corruption; Anti-corruption/Democracy and Human Rights; and Health and Sexual and Reproductive Rights.

considered or not. And sure enough, the help desks have been heavily consulted, with the environment help desk, for example, having had between 150–200 assignments per year (SLU, 2022). However, the aid bureaucrats interviewed state that the help-desk support cannot quite match that of former times, when the bureaucrats were permitted to have a one-on-one working relationship with an expert and, when needed, procure particular external experts for a particular matter. As one Sida program officer recalled:

When I started at Sida [in the 90s], I worked with the energy sector in India, and then I worked with the “super-duper-duper expert” in Sweden. He may not have known that much about foreign aid, but damn, he sure knew how to talk to the energy minister of India. Today we have our help desks, but I can’t say that it’s always the super-duper expert they send, it’s not the same. Today, we don’t have such a large focus on thematic issues, but rather we focus on procurement rules.

In one of our group interviews with five program officers, the officers told us that they have had to “invent new ways” of working with and around the new procurement rules. One of the informants told us that she typically contacts the external experts she needs for advice anyway (e.g., certain scientists at universities) but without being able to pay them for their services, which she finds problematic. Another informant told us that officers now need to learn how the system can “work for you”:

We’ve had framework agreements where we’ve been given the okay that we can handpick the consultants we want. We enter how many hours, then we agree on it and then we just send the contract to Niras and then they sign. So, it works. . . What this [shows] is kind of, how to make the system work for you. So it’s like. . . you don’t break any rules, but you tweak the rules so that they contribute to job satisfaction, motivation and good results.

Another general opinion among the aid bureaucrats interviewed about how the aid business works today is that things have become very rigid, and increasingly run by controllers. One of our informants noted the power shift toward controllers, saying that, today, Sida “sprinkles all units and embassies with controllers,” at the same time as the thematic expertise has been “slimmed down.” Expressions used by our middle-aged interviewees who started working with development aid in the 1990s, to describe Sida and the aid business at that time, include “daring,” “open-minded,” and “flexible,” with a focus on recruiting “people with field and thematic competencies.” One external expert said that “the 90s were gutsy, we had guts” and went on to talk about how today’s organization does not dare to oppose rules. When analyzing this shift, we found that this implies that Sida’s task today has increasingly become one of identifying, creating, and supporting legitimate “proper organizations” that can forward funding to final recipients in need. As an example of this allocation of responsibility, one program officer stated that:

Before, we had much more focus on development. . . We worked collaboratively with institutions. We were part of a development process in these countries. (Today). . . we’re not in touch with the state in the same way. We used to have a dialogue with the state. And who do we have a dialogue with now? It’s our partner organizations.

Thus, the main focus today, to be eligible for funding with taxpayers’ money, is on making sure that recipient partners are proper organizations. Needless to say, this has created a new uncertainty about how to turn those partners into proper organizations and how to tell if they really are. In Chapters 2 and 5, we described the theoretical underpinnings for how trusted third-party organizations can be used in processes of *trust transference* when organizations in the donor role are to assess the trustworthiness of organizations in the recipient role with the aim of reducing relational uncertainties. Below, we develop this discussion further from the point of view of the external experts engaged in such assessments and some of the recipient organizations receiving the support. We also describe how

external experts are contracted to help organizations in the recipient role become “proper organizations.”

The RBM Framework Contract: Legitimizing and Creating Proper Organizations

Starting in 2013, a novel way of using external experts has been Sida’s framework agreement for RBM. The way the contract works is that Sida can suggest a consultant to be contracted to support organizations in the recipient role in the writing of better aid proposals and logical frameworks for their proposals and providing RBM training and support to recipients to become more results-oriented in general.⁸ Similarly, as the help-desk contract, this support is aimed at organizations in the recipient role and Sida’s implementing units. And the understanding among many of those involved is that this support is offered “for free” since the bills are paid by a central unit at Sida headquarters. The procedure is such that any Sida officer can request support for projects they are handling. In practice, this means that the Sida officer “offers” the organization in the recipient role RBM support or support from one of the help desks. The offer is often given in conjunction with an assessment of ongoing support or new support, when the organization in the recipient role needs to submit their results framework.

Our general perception is that the main underlying aim of consultancy support today is that it is a way for organizations in the donor role (in this case Sida) to reduce the relational uncertainty at hand. Services are “offered” to the recipient organization at times when the aid bureaucrat in charge feels uncertain about whether the potential recipient organization will deliver good results. As we described in more detail in Chapter 5, adopting generally legitimate structures and procedures can be viewed as POPs for good results.

⁸The consulting company Niras (formerly InDevelop) has held the overall RBM framework agreement with Sida since 2011. In addition, a similar framework agreement with Sida’s research unit for the years 2008–2016, the aim of which is to support the research unit and Sida’s research partners with RBM implementation, was awarded to AIMS Consulting. Similar agreements exist for the nine help desks.

Once a potential aid recipient has received the trusted third-party services (i.e., the POPs) – the donor representative generally feels more certain and can proceed with funding decisions. For example, as one of our informants, an aid bureaucrat at Sida, told us, one way to ensure that he would feel certain “about the investments on this horse” (meaning a potential new recipient organization) was to make sure that the organization had received the RBM support contracted from the external experts. Two of the contracted RBM consulting companies – Associates for International Management Services (AIMS) and Niras – are described below, where we find that, although they both offer “RBM advice,” their approaches differ. Hence, behind the single RBM label, there is still variation to be found.

The AIMS Approach to RBM Support

In previous literature on how and when measurements become counterproductive, it has often been pointed out that when management technologies, such as the logical framework approach, are required, this in turn creates demand for more measurements, which can become counterproductive (Eyben et al., 2016; Natsios, 2010). Because management consultants sell these management technologies (Abrahamson, 1996; Natsios, 2010; Røvik, 1996), they are also often blamed for causing overregulation.

One of the consultancy firms we have studied, AIMS, a firm that during the period 2008–2013 had over 100 assignments with Sida and its recipient organizations in research cooperation, clearly saw its role as one of supporting recipient organizations in how to use logical frameworks the rational, traditional way, with a hypothesis and measurable indicators throughout the project.⁹ When interviewed, the principal consultant stated that it was important, “already during the planning stage of a research project, to have a hypothesis on impacts, or how the research results were going to solve problems in society” by, for example, “measuring citations of the research by others.”

One of the organizations in the recipient role, the International Science Programme (ISP), recalls some serious questioning from

⁹Information from AIMS website: <http://www.intlmgt.com/projects>

this time period of its way of reporting results, as well as a hostile attitude and rhetorically questioning by Sida about why it should have to support ISP at all. ISP thus found itself in a situation where it lacked funding to cover the coming month's salaries and was close to having to dismiss several staff members. A proposed "solution" from Sida to reduce this relational uncertainty was for ISP to implement RBM. The minutes from the meeting where the topic was raised stated that:

Results-based management must be implemented in ISP's planning and reporting of activities financed by Sida. By extension, the RBM model is to be used in the activities ISP supports.

(Sida, 2009, p. 2)

Sida's research unit brought up the "offer" of ISP receiving support from the AIMS consultancy company. At first, however, ISP did little about the matter and did not contact AIMS since one of the ISP directors saw the offer as "typical mistrust of our work." Thus, at the next meeting, the "offer" became a formal "request" by Sida that ISP takes on support from AIMS. The minutes from that meeting stated that "ISP should, as soon as possible, arrange an RBM workshop with John Mathiason (Syracuse University, USA) as the leader" (Sida, 2009, p. 1). In this situation, ISP realized that it had no choice but to adapt to their funder's "request." Thus, with support from the AIMS consultancy firm, ISP introduced the logical framework approach and developed 32 key performance indicators (KPIs) to be used to follow up their projects. Although ISP had long had its own ways and technologies for tracking results (see Chapter 7), this example shows us that these were deemed too uncertain by the Sida program officer. Hence, for a decision to be made on continued support, ISP had to conform by adopting general RBM technologies, aided by external experts trusted by Sida. Despite all the talk about consultants being facilitators and ownership lying with the recipient organization, ISP's methods officer stated that the following occurred when the log frame and indicators were chosen:

Yes, we had the goals, specific objectives, and then AIMS made a logframe with indicators that related to these three specific objectives. And then when it was in place, Sida selected the ten that they wanted us to work with right now.

The cited statement shows that AIMS had a very influential role in defining ISP's log frame and indicators. The Sida officer responsible trusted RBM and AIMS and, as some of this trust could be transferred to ISP, the perceived uncertainty of effect was reduced enough to enable further funding. ISP had now become a "proper organization" with trusted structures and processes.

Throughout the years, it seems as AIMS consultants became very influential in actually deciding who should receive financing from Sida. The main consultant of AIMS stated in an interview that:

It is easy to show whether your research worked or not. So, if you are not able to specify how your research is supposed to be *used*, if you can't do that, you shouldn't get any money. At least not from Sida.

AIMS thus promoted a perspective that knowledge of how research results were going to be used should be a strict criterion for receiving funding from Sida; thus, we see a tendency toward consultocracy. In a later interview, the Sida's director for research aid during the years when AIMS was first contracted reflected on the use of these consultants: "Yes, we needed them, we needed them when it [the message from politicians] became so clear that we needed to show 'results' in aid." Further illustration of AIMS' influence on decision-making at Sida, over the years, can be seen in that AIMS was not only contracted by the organizations in the recipient role and Sida, the donor, but also to evaluate how RBM was implemented in the research aid supported by Sida (Mathiason et al., 2013).

Applying general management schemes may certainly increase trust and legitimacy, but, as discussed in Chapter 7, this is no guarantee that specific, local operations become more efficient, unless condition-specific adjustments are made along the way. And

when we look more closely at whether the AIMS approach did in fact support the delivery of actual results, we find that the AIMS consultants themselves continuously report back to Sida that they find “highly variable reporting on outcomes” from the organizations they have worked with. Based on this, AIMS continuously recommends to Sida that its officers should request improved results reporting from recipient organizations in particular “given formats” (AIMS, 2013, p. 64 ska heta Mathiason et al.). This further demonstrates that external expert organizations such as AIMS have been driving the proper organization agenda in relation to both the donor (“a proper donor should not provide funding to organizations who cannot specify x”) and the recipient (“a proper recipient should be able to specify x. . .”). The contract with AIMS came to an end in 2016, when Sida decided there should be an agency-wide framework agreement for RBM. By that time, AIMS had, over a period of 8 years, supported over 50 research organizations in over 100 projects in more than 30 countries.¹⁰

The Niras Approach to RBM Support

As a comparison, the consulting firm Niras (then InDevelop), which was awarded the Sida framework contract for RBM in 2011, had from the agreement’s inception a somewhat different approach to RBM (than AIMS). Niras’ consultants clearly stated from the beginning that they did that not want to sell a standard RBM technology or approach, arguing that other consultancy companies sold “theory of change consultants” or “LFA consultants” or “harvesting consultants.” One Niras consultant making the claim that:

Yes, some work in such a way that they sell theory of change and that’s basically what they do, and they have their modules and their approach and their method and that’s it, it’s all done. But, that’s not how we do it. And – yes – it’s a little harder to work the way we do. But it’s maybe more like. . . indirectly it becomes our brand too, that we don’t work like that.

¹⁰<http://www.intlmgmt.com/projects>

In our interviews with Niras consultants in 2022, they talked about their approach as the “Niras approach,” implying that their role was one of “hand-holding” or a “lubricant” of sorts. Important features of the Niras approach to RBM are the views that learning is more important than accountability and that consultants should not provide ready-made packages or one method for all, but rather they should listen to the clients, always asking “What are your needs?,” “What is the problem?” or “Is this really the problem?,” and “What parts of this actually can or need to be measured?” Adjustments are thus allowed or even encouraged, and customers are free to whichever method they want. Hence, Niras consultants promote a softer approach to measurements, with “a couple of key indicators, so that one doesn’t drown in the stream of information.” In fact, one of the consultants stated that the expression of “obsessive measurement disorder” had come in handy for the firm since it described an extreme position – a position that Niras did not promote.

Another consultant interviewed noted that he always brought up the topic of OMD in RBM training courses to demonstrate an extreme that organizations should be careful to avoid. Thus, Niras consultants clearly see themselves as the drivers and fashion setters of an alternative approach to traditional RBM. However, similarly to AIMS, we find that Niras consultants have also had an influence on Sida’s decision-making processes, not least through their views on “minimum requirements.” As one of the consultants commented:

We’ve talked a lot about us being a kind of mediator and intermediary, both when it comes to seeing what the organization is starting from and what Sida’s minimum requirements are. The Ministry for Foreign Affairs has requirements and Sida has requirements, and most organizations just want to do things right because they want money, and that’s completely understandable. Even there, we might come in and say stop, and verify, Sida doesn’t want you to use the Sida system like that, Sida wants you to use the system you’re using and follow-up the minimum requirements.

Here, we see a clear difference between the ideals and practices of the AIMS approach and the Niras approach to RBM. However, despite their belief in the softer, more flexible approach, Niras' consultants told us that they often struggle to apply it fully, and that the alternative approach seems at times to generate more uncertainty than certainty. From time to time, it also happens that someone else, often an evaluator, suggests that it is the adjusted result matrix that is the problem. As one of the Niras consultants stated:

Nowadays [when this happens], we always try to ask “Is this *really* the problem?” However, almost always it's simply stated that the problem *is* the result matrix itself or the theory of change itself... it's always like this.

In sum, despite the two consultancy companies having taken somewhat different approaches (with AIMS clearly wanting to sell a standard technology and Niras' alternative approach of trying not to sell a particular technology or method but a customized solution instead), in their respective ways, both companies have come to serve organizations in both the donor role and the recipient role, and both companies have been influential in shaping the notion of POPs, i.e., in the form of aid organizations using RBM criteria to reduce the uncertainty in their decision-making and obtain aid financing. AIMS followed a common approach discussed in previous literature on management – it sold a management technology, in this case the logical framework and certain KPIs. In doing so, the AIMS approach encouraged increasing the number of measurements requested from the recipients. The Niras approach, on the other hand, was clearly and explicitly an “anti-OMD approach.” The company promoted fewer indicators, not using a specific measurement scheme, keeping the real problem in focus, always adjusting to the reality on the ground, etc. It is worth noting, however, that both companies faced difficulties in getting their approaches through. For example, in an evaluation conducted by AIMS itself, it was argued that Sida officers did not request reporting of results and appropriate measurements to a

sufficient extent, and that a results culture had therefore not materialized according to plan.

The Niras consultants similarly argued that their alternative approach did not bear out in the organizational culture since there were so many other experts (such as controllers and other external experts, for example, at the help desks) who promoted a pro-measurement culture. As discussed in the beginning of this chapter, an aid bureaucrat coordinating a decision-making process must manage multiple issues that must be backed by a “web of bureaucrats”: internal advisors must provide “no objections,” external advice on different perspectives must be taken into account, etc.

Although all of the bureaucrats in this web may be tasked with supporting the same project, they seldom meet and learn about the advice provided by the other bureaucrats. As an example, one of the help-desk officers interviewed talked about the difficulty of only being a part of the process “from the sidelines,” and not knowing if, why, or how your input is used. That is, consulted experts seldom see the whole picture. Although many different external experts are involved in the same process, they seldom work together.

The challenge of coordinating input from so many different competencies was also brought up in a recent evaluation skill sets of Sida’s environment help desk (Niras, 2021), where it was stated that, because most assignments are short term, there is a lack of long-term engagement in processes as well as a lack of information and communication among parties involved in the same process. Thus, it is often the case that the different advisers in the web give different advice. This is something that can lead to uncertainty and increased measurements. One of the Niras RBM consultants exemplified this tendency citing the power of controllers:

If you’re talking about a counterforce (to an alternative approach to RBM), controllers are a strong counterforce that blocks the way. It’s an internal counterforce in all the organizations we work with, in both Sida and partner organizations, and even if . . . if the contact person that Sida has at the organization says that “It’s okay to do this,” they’ve got a controller in their organization who says “Hold on. You have to report this, and this, and this

is important.” And then we end up with this quantification, not only of activities and output, but in general some kind of conclusion is drawn from it.

The consultants interviewed claimed that, in the end, this led to a fear or anxiety of wrongdoing, and that, in itself, this fear then became a factor that drove increased measurements, a force they had difficulty managing. One consultant even argued that this fear had led to risk matrices becoming more important than results matrices in the aid organizations. What this shows is that, despite having access to a balanced set of advice from a range of experts, the multitude of advice often creates not less but *more* uncertainty for the aid bureaucrats involved.

Summing Up 70 Years of External Expertise

In this chapter, we have shown that a mission drift has occurred in Swedish development aid as concerns both the in-house expert role of aid bureaucrats and the role of outside experts procured from the consulting market. We have described a gradual shift from an era in which aid bureaucrats were to contract an external expert to fix the poverty problem (the Quick-fix Implementer Era), to an era where the problem was perceived as much more complex and required close relationships and joint participatory approaches (the Collaborative Turn Era), to an era where the role of aid bureaucrats is reduced to that of a catalyst whose main responsibility is to justify that aid money goes to the right partners and ensure that aid recipients have “proper” systems to deal with aid funds (the POP era). The role of external experts has thus also undergone a change – from perceiving their outside expertise as the solution to problems to seeing these experts as facilitators and, today, to perceiving them as the legitimizers of proper donor and recipient behavior. [Table 1](#) summarizes the mission drift that has taken place in the field of aid during the three different eras.

The analysis in this chapter departs from an interest in the role of experts, and in particular external expertise, as a means to reduce uncertainties of development aid operations. Over the years, the idealized expert role has changed, and today, external experts mainly act in the role of standard setters – often hired to legitimize

Table 1. Three Eras of External Expertise in Development Aid.

	Quick-Fix Implementer Era 1960s–1990s	Collaborative Turn Era 1990s–2005	Proper Organization Proxy Era 2005–2020s
Role of Sida and its aid bureaucrats	Expert agency – contractor of agents who would solve development aid problems	Expert agency – knowledge leader in Swedish society	Administrative agency – main task to finance and control aid funds. Catalyst.
Dominating competencies and values at Sida	Implementation expertise. “Solving the problems” Development country-focused organization.	Thematic expertise – program officers. Participatory approaches. <i>What</i> values “Doing the right things” Horizontal organization.	Management/generalist expertise. <i>How</i> values “Doing things right” Controllers, lawyers. Hierarchical organization.
Role, use, and critique of external experts	Implementers of projects. Criticized for consultocracy in project decisions.	Facilitators of processes. Close consultants. Criticized for not doing things right and for consultocracy in administrative decisions.	Increase in management experts. Trust transfers to legitimize “proper organizations.” Criticized for not seeing the bigger picture and for consultocracy in project decisions.
Swedish consultancy market	Many smaller Swedish consulting companies	Larger Swedish consulting companies	Mainly large international consulting companies

a particular process or entire organization as “proper” enough. In its donor role, Sida has, for example, made substantial efforts to hire third parties to support organizations in the recipient role in becoming more results-oriented.

As a contribution to the literature – and the current discussion on consultocracy – we have found that during all the three eras (1960s–2020s), external experts have had an influential role in decision-making. The influential role they have played has also been criticized over the years, which has in turn led to new forms of contracting. However, we note that, at the time of writing in 2023, the harsh critique of external experts being too close to decision-makers is no longer as pronounced. The contracting procedures and framework agreements of the current era seem to grant selected experts legitimacy to be seen as tamed enough to work closely with decision-makers. Unsurprisingly, throughout development aid’s modern history, external experts have adjusted to selling what it is possible to sell, in line with shifting expectations. And all throughout, they have served an important function – that of making organizations in the donor role less uncertain of their decisions on which recipients should receive funding. Interestingly, however, the use of external experts has at the same time given rise to more uncertainty, which, in turn, has called for more experts.