A fall from grace?
- A case study of Sweden’s official development assistance to primary education in the 2000s and 2010s

Keywords: Bilateral, Global Partnership for Education, Multilateral, Official Development Assistance (ODA), Primary Education, Results Agenda
Abstract

Official Development Assistance (ODA) to primary education has constituted a significant portion of Sweden’s ODA since the 1960s. Sweden is a strong advocate of aid to primary education and for many years, support to primary education was a priority across Sweden’s many partner countries. However, since at least the early 2000s ODA to primary education has seen a decline in the number of partner countries where this is a priority area and bilateral ODA to primary education has decreased as a share of total ODA. One possible explanation for this decline is the simultaneous rise of the so-called Results Agenda in Sweden’s ODA, characterised by an increasing focus on measuring results and managing aid efficiently. The purpose of this study is to explore to what extent the Results Agenda has influenced the decline in Sweden’s ODA to primary education since the early 2000s, by answering the following research question: “To what extent can the Results Agenda explain the decline of Sweden’s official development assistance to primary education since the early 2000s?”

The theoretical foundation of the study is the Results Agenda, based on research conducted by Therese Brolin and Janet Vähämäki on the Results Agenda in Sweden’s ODA. A case study design is applied, using qualitative elite interviews to gather empirical data.

The results indicate that there seems to be a connection between the rise of the Results Agenda and the decline of Sweden’s ODA to primary education, however only in the number of partner countries where primary education is a key thematic priority and not in the total amount of ODA to education. The most conclusive result of the case study is that ODA to primary education has been redistributed from mainly bilateral ODA through public institutions in partner countries to multilateral ODA in order to increase efficiency and focus ODA on fewer thematic areas in fewer partner countries.
Acronyms and Abbreviations

EFA FTI  Education for All Fast-Track Initiative
GPE     Global Partnership for Education
MDG(s)  Millennium Development Goals
ODA     Official Development Assistance
SDG(s)  Sustainable Development Goals
Sida    Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
MFA     Ministry for Foreign Affairs

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1. Introduction

Official Development Assistance (ODA) has been around in its current form since the late 1940s after World War II when the United States provided financial assistance to rebuild western Europe, the so-called Marshall Plan (Sachs, 2015). ODA is primarily the concern of nation states, characterized by rich donor countries, often in Europe and North America, providing financial assistance to poor countries, sometimes referred to as developing countries. This is an oversimplification, and a more elaborate description and definition of ODA is provided later in this section. However, ODA has not changed very much since the Marshall Plan almost 80 years ago in the basic notion of it being support from rich to poor countries. Sweden has long been a major donor country, providing ODA since 1962 when the Swedish Riksdag adopted government proposition 1962:100 establishing Sweden’s first government agency solely dedicated for ODA (Wohlgemuth, 2012). Since then, the ODA budget has steadily increased, and development cooperation has become a cornerstone of Sweden’s foreign policy. Sweden is a small country but has gained significant recognition in international fora for its extensive ODA, both in financial terms and geographically with a large number of recipients, often referred to as partner countries. Sweden’s strong commitment to ODA and humanitarian assistance has led to it being called a ‘humanitarian superpower’ (van Eggermont, 2016).

Support to education, especially to increasing access to primary education\(^1\), in partner countries has constituted a significant portion of Sweden’s ODA since its inception (Johnson, 2017). And it is not without merit that primary education has been a key ODA priority for such a long time; the benefits of a good education are hard to overstate. For instance, there are strong correlations between education and poverty reduction, better health, productivity, gender equality, etc. (Sachs, 2015). Thus, the case for investing in education for every child seems obvious, and we have seen great strides in this area in the decades past with millions more children gaining access to primary education across the world (United Nations, 2015). The target set out by UN member states in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000 was for every child, boy and girl alike, to complete a full primary education by 2015 (ibid). The target was not fully achieved but during this 15-year period, the net enrolment rate\(^2\)

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\(^1\) Primary education is providing foundational learning opportunities in core knowledge areas such as reading, writing and mathematics (UNESCO, 2021).

\(^2\) The net enrolment rate is the number, or percentage, of children in a particular age group enrolled in the corresponding educational level, i.e., children of primary school age enrolled in primary education.
rose from 83 to 91 per cent in developing countries (ibid), which translated to tens of millions more children being able to attend primary school. Development aid from rich to poor countries have, at least in part contributed to this success and making sure every child attend school has long been a target for major donors, including Sweden. However, while primary school enrolment rates have seen great progress the last two decades, there is still a learning crisis in many low- and middle-income countries. Most children in developing countries today have access to primary education, but the quality is often lacking and children attending school are not guaranteed an education that is of high enough quality and which prepares them for continued higher education or the increasingly knowledge intense labour market. The need for ensuring quality education for every child is reiterated by many scholars, including Rossiter et al (2018) who have, as part of a longitudinal study of children from infancy to adulthood, studied the impact of education among children in a number of developing countries. They found that although most children attended primary school, 40 percent could not read or write at the age of eight although they attended school regularly (ibid). Hence, while access to primary education has increased tremendously the last two decades it does not guarantee an education of sufficient quality. Knowledge has become a key commodity in the modern economy and the need for a well-educated workforce has increased in recent decades and will continue to increase going forward. Thus, a lack of quality education opportunities for millions of children and youth not only have a negative impact on individuals but equally undermines the economic and social development for the whole economy (Johnson, 2017). Consequently, although the number, and proportion of children attending primary school has risen substantially, the lacking quality has not alleviated the learning crisis for millions of children across the developing world, a fact that Sida also points out (Sida, 2021). As a UN member state and signatory of the 2030 Agenda, Sweden has committed to ensuring ‘inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all’, including quality primary education for every child (United Nations, 2021).

Despite Sweden’s commitment to support access to quality primary education for children in partner countries and in spite of acknowledging the learning crisis in many countries, with lacking quality of primary education for many children, ODA has seen a decline for two decades in the form of primary education declining as a priority for Sweden. Bilateral ODA to primary education has simultaneously fallen significantly as a portion of total ODA to primary education during that same period. The number of partner countries where Sweden is
prioritizing primary education in its development aid has fallen substantially during that last 20+ years. Instead, increasing amounts and portions of ODA to support primary education is channelled through multilateral institutions, including the Global Partnership for Education and UNICEF (Openaid, 2021a). Indeed, in absolute terms the amount of ODA to primary education has risen over the course of 20 years, but not as a share of total ODA, which has risen significantly over the past two decades (ibid). Over the last two decades, there have been four major yearly spikes in ODA to primary education and they are coinciding with new replenishments to the Global Partnership for Education, formerly known as Education for All Fast-Track Initiative in 2008, 2011, 2014, 2018-2020 (Openaid, 2021b).

The graph below shows the distribution of ODA to primary education since the late 1990s. The blue line represents total ODA to primary education while the orange line represents ODA to primary education that is distributed through multilateral channels. ODA to primary education has evidently risen in absolute terms, but the proportion of Sweden’s total ODA budget that is allocated to primary education has declined. The graph also shows that ODA to primary education increasingly is channelled through multilateral channels.

GRAPH 1 Distribution of Sweden’s ODA to primary education. (Source: Openaid, 2021a).

The explanation for why ODA to primary education has declined, especially bilateral ODA, and why Sweden has been downgrading primary education as a thematic priority is not clear. However, one potential explanation for this change is the simultaneous rise of the so-called Results Agenda which to a varying degree has influenced donor behaviour for two decades, rising to prominence in Sweden during the 2000s and early 2010s.
1.1 Purpose and research question
This study sets out to explore the role of the Results Agenda in the decline of Sweden’s ODA to primary education, given the Results Agenda’s influence during the last two decades in the broader donor community. The purpose of this study is to explore to what extent the Results Agenda has influenced this change of Sweden’s ODA to primary education since the early 2000s. The study will be guided by the following research question:

- To what extent can the Results Agenda explain the decline\(^3\) of Sweden’s official development assistance to primary education since the early 2000s?

1.2 Defining Official Development Assistance
This study is frequently referring to Official Development Assistance (ODA) and hence, it is important to define what ODA is and explain the different forms of ODA. The OECD’s Development Assistance Committee (DAC) is organizing all major donors to set common standards and principles for ODA (OECD, 2021a). DAC defines ODA as “government aid that promotes and specifically targets the economic development and welfare of developing countries” (OECD, 2021b). In simple terms, ODA is development aid from one state to another. However, ODA may flow through different channels, often divided between bilateral and multilateral. Bilateral ODA is distributed directly from a donor to a recipient, or partner, while multilateral ODA is distributed to multilateral organizations such as the United Nations or the World Bank for them to disburse according to their mandates and strategies (Biscaye, 2021). Globally, about 30% of ODA is distributed through multilateral channels (ibid).

1.3 Delimitation of study and motivation of subject
This study is focusing its attention on the influence the Results Agenda has had over a specific thematic area of Sweden’s ODA, namely the support to primary education. It will not explore the broader effects of the Results Agenda on Swedish ODA and whether or not the Results Agenda can be deemed successful or not in the context of Sweden’s ODA. To further delimit this study, it will only examine a single case over a fairly short time span of two decades since 2000.

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\(^3\) Decline refers to the shrinking number of partner countries where primary education is a top priority for Sweden’s ODA, and the decline of bilateral ODA’s share of financial support to primary education. I.e., the overall decline of primary education as a priority in Sweden’s ODA.
Education, especially primary education for children, makes up the foundation of a prosperous society and competitive economy. Studying Sweden’s support to children’s education in partner countries in a historic perspective is therefore arguably of interest within the field of economic history.

1.4 Previous research

Previous research shows that the Results Agenda has been influential in how ODA is conducted by all major donors, including Sweden. A few studies are highlighted here in order to situate this study in this research landscape about ODA and the Results Agenda. The studies presented below are chiefly concerned with the effects of the Results Agenda either on the donor-partner relationship or its effects on aid results in partner countries. This is in contrast to this study which is focusing on the influence the Results Agenda has had over Sweden’s ODA to primary education strictly from a donor perspective.

Brolin (2017a) studied the increasing focus on results by donors and how this has influenced the relationship with partner countries. Brolin identified a problematic relationship between the increasing focus on results by donors and ownership by partner countries (ibid). Brolin focused her study on how various stakeholders are framing and influencing the Results Agenda in Swedish ODA, studying domestic as well as international stakeholders (ibid). According to Brolin, Sweden’s ODA has become increasingly instrumentalized and processes-oriented and measuring short-term results have gained influence at the cost of long-term impact and development goals (Brolin, 2017a). This has also resulted in weaker ownership by partner countries, showing that the Results Agenda is difficult to combine with greater ownership by partners (ibid).

The argument presented by Brolin, that ODA has become more instrumentalized is also in line with findings presented by Riddell and Niño-Zarazúa (2016) who argue that ODA to education has become more projectized, at the cost of long-term impact. Their study examined the effectiveness of ODA to education, concluding that ODA to education often is ineffective due to the focus on short-term projects instead of long-term impact on the educational system (ibid). Riddell and Niño-Zarazúa (2016) even argue that the increased emphasis on short-term, results-focused projects can harm the long-term impact on education as donors are not the ones that should or could make long-term decisions about the educational system in partner
countries, as this should be managed mainly by partners themselves. Thus, as claimed by Brolin, they argue that a lacking ownership by partner countries will undermine the long-term positive impact for education (ibid).

Similar results are presented by Valters and Whitty (2017) in their analysis of the Results Agenda in the UK’s ODA between 1997-2017. They argue that the UK’s ODA during this period became increasingly narrow and focused on short-term results rather than long-term development impact, and that it put accountability towards taxpayers before the needs of partner countries (ibid). In 1997, when the Department for International Development (DFID) was founded by the then newly elected Labour government, DFID prided itself for being innovative and applying new approaches to ODA (ibid). These included partnerships rather than donor-recipient relations, stronger partner country ownership, and a clear focus on long-term development impact; in contrast with a narrow, projectized ODA guided by donor interests rather than partner country ownership (ibid). This approach continued fairly untouched for years until the mid-2000s, when a slew of events initiated a change in approach towards ODA. Beginning with the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness in 2005 and continuing with the global financial crisis a couple of years later, the UK’s ODA agenda transformed, becoming more results-oriented and politicized (ibid). When the Conservative government coalition came to power in 2010, the ODA budget continued to be high but at the same time ODA became a much more politicized policy area with calls for greater transparency and results management (Valters and Whitty, 2017).

Sjöstedt (2013) offers an interesting perspective on the Results Agenda from a Swedish perspective, studying aid effectiveness in the light of increased results focus. It is impossible to write about the Results Agenda in ODA without mentioning the 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness. In his paper, Sjöstedt (2013) is zooming in on the seeming contradiction in the Paris Declaration between increased ownership by partner countries and the increased focus on results-based management of ODA by donors. The essence of his findings is perhaps best illustrated by an extract from his paper:

At the core of this tension is the fact that although all donors are supposed to promote partner country ownership, harmonize their efforts with other donors, and align themselves with partner country priorities, results-based management simultaneously implies not only a focus on
Sjöstedt (2013) is also shining a light on the apparent relationship between results-based management of ODA and the increasingly stringent prioritization by donors. This is exemplified by Sweden’s prioritization of gender aspects in its ODA, specifically by studying how gender was integrated in education projects in three different countries (ibid). The conclusions of his study show that there are often tensions and confusion over what should be prioritised, partner needs and ownership or donor priorities and results measuring (ibid). The findings echo what other scholars have conclude, that the Results Agenda of donors may have consequences for how development aid is conducted, both by donors and partners.

Offering a similar but different perspective, ODA can also be an instrument of political power by donor countries, where development aid is allocated according to donors’ geopolitical interests or as an instrument to proclaim certain values, such as democracy and human rights (Wright and Winters, 2010). ODA has increasingly also become a topic of interest in domestic policymaking, as argued by Kim (2016) with the case of South Korea which is a rather new member of the international donor community. According to Kim, ODA is a hotly contested and ideologically driven policy area in South Korean domestic politics and a range of stakeholders are struggling for influence over ODA policymaking, including political decision-makers, NGOs, private sector companies, and labour unions (ibid). Kim’s study clearly shows that different stakeholders have different interests of and visions for ODA even before engaging with international stakeholders (ibid), a conclusion that likely can be translated to the Swedish context as well.
2. Theorizing the Results Agenda

Two scholars have offered the main theoretical influence for this study, Therese Brolin, and Janet Vähämäki who have focused their research on the Results Agenda in Sweden’s ODA. Brolin especially is offering a useful framework for identifying the key characteristics of the Results Agenda from a Swedish donor perspective, which has been adapted and applied in this study. Their scholarly work is particularly interesting for this study because of their specific interest of Sweden as a donor and how the Results Agenda has shaped and transformed how Sweden’s ODA has been conducted over the years. In order to understand the Results Agenda, it is however important to revisit its origins and the rationale driving its adoption as a key component of modern ODA policy.

The Results Agenda can be traced back to neoliberal ideas of public management and in particular New Public Management which has influenced international development cooperation for decades, first rising to prominence in the 1970s and 1980s (Peet and Hartwick, 2015). However, it is worth noting that measuring effects and continually evaluating efforts is nothing new in ODA, as evident by the adoption of a 1962 government proposition establishing Sweden’s ODA, which clearly articulated the need to monitor and evaluate the effects of projects and programmes (Wohlgemuth, 2012). This was seen not only as in the interest of Sweden as a donor, but for its partner countries as well by creating trustful relationships and achieve tangible results (ibid). The Results Agenda was firmly established in the mid-2000s with the adoption of the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness and has since had a firm grip on the way ODA is evaluated and assessed. The Paris Declaration was adopted by over a hundred states in 2005, establishing common standards and coordination procedures with the goal of increasing aid effectiveness among donor countries, and increasing the focus on results and evaluation of ODA (Johnson, 2017). It is however important to note that the Paris Declaration not only focused on results of ODA, but reiterated partners’ ownership of their own development (ibid). It is this multi-faceted agenda of the Paris Declaration that has led to widespread confusion among development practitioners and officials in donor countries and partner countries alike in regard to what has superiority, the Results Agenda and donors’ priorities or partners’ ownership and development needs (Sjöstedt, 2013). In Sweden, the Results Agenda was particularly present and influential during the late 2000s and early 2010s with several new results initiatives during that period that constitute the Results Agenda.
(Brolin, 2017a). This was also a time of political shifts in Sweden with a new, centre-right government with clear ambitions to increase the focus on results (ibid).

Previous research and other scholarly works on the Results Agenda all identify some common key characteristics when explaining the Results Agenda and its implications for ODA. One of these characteristics is the pivot towards short-term, projectized and instrumentalized ODA. Another significant characteristic of the Results Agenda is the increased focus on donor priorities and donor control, making ODA a more politicized policy area than it has previously been. Although these characteristics are not the purpose of the Results Agenda, they are seemingly inevitable consequences of it. These characteristics have evolved, sometimes unintentionally it seems, out of the Results Agenda because of how the Results Agenda has been framed by key development actors, including the government⁴ and Sida. Brolin (2017b) has explored how the Swedish government and Sida have been framing the Results Agenda, i.e., their rationale for implementing the Results Agenda in the way they do. The below figure is a slightly adapted version of Brolin’s summary of how the Results Agenda is being framed. Brolin also included a bilateral partner in Uganda of relevance for her study which has been left out of the figure below as it is not relevant in this case.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>The Swedish Government</th>
<th>Sida</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Diagnostic</strong></td>
<td><strong>Problem</strong></td>
<td>Insufficient knowledge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>framing</td>
<td>Lack of results/evidence of results from Swedish</td>
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<td></td>
<td>development co-operation.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Who or what</strong></td>
<td>Lack of accountability,</td>
<td>A complex development context.</td>
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<td><strong>to blame</strong></td>
<td>primarily within Sida.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Prognostic</strong></td>
<td>Implementation of the results agenda for</td>
<td>Improve the reporting of results for</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>framing</td>
<td>increased accountability towards taxpayers in</td>
<td>increased accountability to satisfy</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Sweden.</td>
<td>requests from the Swedish Government.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Focus on monitoring.</td>
<td>Learning to improve development</td>
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|               |                                                | effectiveness.                           | ⁴ Represented by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs.
According to Brolin (2017b), there are different framings of the Results Agenda depending on the actor who defines it, both in regard to why it is needed and what it will lead to. As the figure above makes clear, there are for instance a difference between the Swedish government and Sida, with the government as the overall agenda setter and Sida as an implementing government agency. An overarching theme, which is elaborated further by Brolin (2017b) is accountability. Apart from accountability, the Results Agenda is also framed by Sida as an efficiency tool meant to increase development efficiency in partner countries. The focus on accountability is supported by Vähämäki (2017) who found that accountability, from the government’s perspective towards taxpayers and from Sida’s perspective towards the government on the one hand and towards its development partners one the other, is the main driving force for the Results Agenda.

Although the Results Agenda stems from a desire to increase aid efficiency and accountability to all parties involved, its attention has been focused on accountability to domestic stakeholders, namely taxpayers and the government, rather than partners abroad directly affected by initiatives funded by ODA. The Results Agenda is however not only about domestic accountability and both Brolin and Vähämäki consider development impact as well, i.e., results of ODA in partner countries, as a key aspect of the Results Agenda. From the research by Brolin and Vähämäki, but also by others accounted for in the section on previous research, three characteristics of the Results Agenda are seemingly more prominent than others: accountability, aid efficiency, and development impact.

### 2.1 Accountability

The accountability aspect is the most striking characteristic of the Results Agenda, as described by both Brolin (2017b) and Vähämäki (2017). Accountability is not primarily the main concern of partners, but rather for donors who are accountable first and foremost to taxpayers. The accountability aspect is influencing ODA at all stages but with different

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Motivational framing</th>
<th>Accountability to Swedish taxpayers.</th>
<th>Accountability to the Swedish Government and development partners.</th>
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characteristics. From a top-down perspective, the government is concerned about accountability vis-à-vis taxpayers, and stepping down to the operational level and Sida, they are concerned about accountability towards the government, as clearly visualized in the figure by (Brolin, 2017b). According to Brolin (2017), the Results Agenda has led to donorship rather than ownership by partner countries. What is meant by this is that the agenda and targets of Sweden as a donor takes precedence over the ownership by partner countries (ibid). This is further strengthening the conclusion that a key characteristic of the Results Agenda is accountability against the agenda and targets of the donor. This has led to Sida becoming an implementer of Sweden’s ODA agenda, with primary accountability to the government who in turn is accountable to Swedish taxpayers. In that sense, the Results Agenda has made ODA, both on a strategic and operational level, a domestic agenda rather than an international one.

2.2 Development impact

Another characteristic identified as central to the Results Agenda in Sweden’s ODA is development impact. Development impact can in this case best be described as the results of ODA ‘on the ground’ in partner countries, i.e., the results that activities funded by ODA have. However, as pointed out by Willis (2011) development is hard to measure. The question is what indicators are suitable when measuring development impact regardless of thematic area, be it support to primary education or poverty alleviation. In the case of primary education, is net enrolment rate in primary education enough to assess whether or not ODA has been successful, or indeed any other quantifiable measure? These concerns are important when discussing the role of the Results Agenda, as quantifiable measurements are at the core of it. As previously stated, both Vähämäki (2017) and Brolin (2017a) trace back the Results Agenda, as it was understood in the 2000s and early 2010s at least, to ideas connected to New Public Management. The main influence that New Public Management has had on ODA is the focus on outputs and quantitative, short-term targets which is in contrast to other lines of thought about ODA that emphasize long-term development impact with less focus on quantified measures of development. This can be traced back to the main characteristic of the Results Agenda about accountability. In order to ensure accountability, whether it is to taxpayers or the government, there was a need for shorter timeframes with clear targets for what ODA should achieve.
2.3 Aid efficiency

The third characteristic identified as central to the Results Agenda is aid efficiency, meaning that ODA should be efficiently distributed and used both from a donor perspective and a partner perspective. While ODA shall be used in the most effective way possible in regard to achieving development impact, it is equally important from a donor perspective for ODA to be efficiently spent as a share of the total state budget. Monitoring and evaluation are fundamental in ODA according to the Results Agenda (Brolin, 2017b) and has led to the increasing focus on short-termism and quantified measurements in order to increase efficiency of ODA funds. Aid efficiency, as it is understood in the Results Agenda, also entails a focus on a fewer number of partner countries and fewer overarching targets per partner, which was the case for Sweden’s ODA in 2007 with a significant cut of the number of partner countries and a more stringent priorities in each partner country (Brolin, 2017a). From an efficiency perspective, ODA should then be distributed through larger framework programmes focusing on a specific thematic issue rather than smaller projects and smaller organizations. The Results Agenda in the 2000s also resulted in a reorganization internally at Sida, making ODA operations less thematically focused and more focused on monitoring and evaluation and other management issues (Vähämäki, 2017).

2.4 Theoretical summary

Three main characteristics have been identified, from the research conducted separately by Brolin and Vähämäki, as central to the Results Agenda. These three characteristics are based on a donor perspective of ODA and in many cases disregard, or at least downplay, the role of the development partner. These characteristics is forming the theoretical foundation for this study and in order to make sense of these three characteristics, or factors, the below model has been created. The model is based on the factors as they relate to a donor perspective, and not to the perspectives of partners across the world. The model also draws heavily from the one presented by Brolin (2017b). There are alternative theoretical approaches that may be applied to a study like this, including political economy of aid and more traditional ones such as a neoliberal approach to ODA. However, as this is a limited case study of a specific part of Sweden’s ODA, testing a certain theoretical approach seems the best option to maintain a certain amount of validity and reliability.5

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5 Validity and reliability of the study is discussed in the Methodology section.
The model is quite simple, and the purpose of it is to explain how the three factors identified as relevant for this study may be measured in the empirical material, i.e., the interview data gathered from interviews with respondents. Each factor has two measurements each that will guide the coding of the interview data. The measurements are rather broadly formulated as to allow some room to navigate the vast interview material. They are also kept broadly formulated to mirror the differences between the respondents in how they describe the Results Agenda and its influence over Sweden’s ODA to primary education.
3. Methodology

In this section the research design and method of choice are presented, including a description of respondents who have been interviewed for the study. Brief discussions about ethical considerations, about validity and reliability of the study, and about ontological and epistemological considerations are included as well.

3.1 Research design

This study applies a qualitative case study design in order to explore and understand the role of the Results Agenda in Sweden’s ODA to primary education over the last two decades. A case study is particularly useful when the purpose is to gain a deeper and more detailed understanding of a specific phenomenon (Bryman, 2012). However, Lamont (2015) argues that the case study design should not merely describe something in more detail, but instead a case study should strive to test possible explanations that could be generalized to other cases. Both Bryman (2012) and Lamont (2015), stress that the case selection is critical regardless of what type of case is studied. Defining the case is certainly one of the most difficult elements of the case study design. Bryman (2012) refers to five types of cases, all with their distinct characteristics. The case being examined in this study is Sweden’s ODA to primary education, and it has elements of both a critical case and an exemplifying case. The critical case is concerned with testing a hypothesis or established theory, while the exemplifying case strives towards generalizing within the greater context of the case (Bryman, 2012). The case study being examined could arguably be categorized as both a critical and an exemplifying case, however, it lends itself more towards being a critical case as the purpose of this study is to understand to what extent the Results Agenda has influenced the decline of Sweden’s ODA to primary education.

Case studies are commonly criticized for being unable to generalize results and for being sensitive to selection bias by the researcher (Lamont, 2015). In order to mitigate, at least in part, these issues it is critical that the type of case is clear and data gathering is as unbiased as possible (ibid). As this is a critical case study, it does not lend itself to generalizing the results and this is not the stated purpose of this study either. In regard to data selection and collection, it is virtually impossible to completely escape underlying biases, and this will in the end impact the validity of the results. However, this does not make the study less valuable vis-à-vis its main purpose of exploring the role of a particular line of thought, or theory in this
particular case, i.e., the influence of the Results Agenda has had on the decline of Sweden’s ODA to primary education.

3.2 Empirical material
Finding empirical data in forms of written documents or other historic material that explicitly, or indeed implicitly, state a position or direction towards a decline of ODA to primary education has proven difficult. This meant that in order to gather high quality data on the subject, also covering the time period of the last two decades since the start of the 2000s, interviews have been the best option. Interviewing key individuals with unique insights in this particular case and finding respondents have been surprisingly straightforward and all interview requests have been accepted. Interviews provide a rich source of data that is of high quality, assuming the respondents are relevant, and the interviews are conducted properly (Lamont, 2015).

3.3 Semi-structured interviews
The primary source material consists of interviews conducted with current and former professionals with unique insights into Sweden’s ODA to education, what can be referred to as elite interviews (Lamont, 2015). The respondents have been selected through a snowball sampling where respondents have suggested other relevant respondents (Teorell and Svensson, 2007). This sampling method has proved very useful in identifying key individuals to interview as the circle of individuals with the necessary experience from the time period this study covers is fairly limited. In several instances the respondents have recommended individuals already recommended by others, which in a sense validates the sample of respondents. A total of seven interviews were conducted with individuals who are currently or have previously worked in key decision-making positions within the Ministry for Foreign Affairs or Sida, and sometimes both. The material gathered through these interviews offers a unique and invaluable primary source of data.

The semi-structured interview format seemed the best option in this case as it offers a degree of freedom to deviate from the prepared interview questions, while still ensuring consistency in all interviews (Lamont, 2015). As many of the respondents have not been working for quite some time and the time period of interest in this study stretches back two decades, the interview guide consisted of topics to be discussed, rather than direct questions. In a sense,
the interviews were a hybrid format between semi-structured and unstructured interviews. The unstructured interview format is more like an open conversation than an interview, which makes the format open for more unfiltered answers (Lamont, 2015), giving the respondent more legroom to think back on his/her time with Sida or the MFA. The interview guide did also evolve slightly over the course of the study owing to new insights gained during interviews with respondents, and it is this flexibility of semi-structured interviews that make the format especially useful (Bryman, 2012). All interviews were conducted in Swedish, and the source material has been translated to English.

The original version of the interview guide included the following topics and questions to be discussed:

- **Description of respondent and his/her professional background and role in ODA to education.**
- **Main priorities for ODA to primary education during your time at Sida/MFA (2000-2020).**
- **What are the main considerations when allocating ODA to primary education? What drives Sweden’s policies on ODA to primary education?**
- **Changes in the way Sida/MFA works internally, structure of department, etc.**
- **In general, how has ODA to primary education changed over the years?**
- **Distribution between bilateral and multilateral ODA to primary education.**
- **How do you understand the so-called Results Agenda?**
- **The Results Agenda and ODA to primary education.**
- **Accountability for what and towards who?**
- **How do you measure development results of ODA to primary education? And how important is measuring results? And why?**
- **To what extent has efficiency of Sida’s ways of working played a role for how ODA to primary education has been allocated and prioritised?**
- **Anything you want to raise that we haven’t discussed?**

Interviews are a time-consuming method compared to many other data collection methods. It requires a lot of preparations in the form of identifying and contacting respondents and preparing for interviews (Lamont, 2015). The process of transcribing interview recordings is perhaps the most tedious task but necessary in order to make use of the gathered data (ibid).
The seven respondents have been anonymised, but their profiles are presented below in order to understand their current or previous roles within Sida and the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. They are numbered from 1 to 7 in the order the interviews were conducted. The length of the interviews varied between 41 minutes and 1 hour and 38 minutes. In total, the interview material amounted to almost 8.5 hours. The interview data was coded against the six measurements presented in the theoretical model of the Result Agenda:

**Accountability**
- Accountability to domestic stakeholders.
- Accountability for spending efficiency.

**Development impact**
- Focus on short-term results.
- Quantitative focus when measuring results of ODA.

**Aid efficiency**
- More focused and targeted ODA.
- Leaner and more efficient internal organization.

The seven respondents participating in the study are not named for ethical reasons, but they are described below in order to understand their previous, and current, roles within Sida or the Ministry for Foreign Affairs.

**Respondent 1**
The first respondent is currently working for Sida focusing on the education portfolio. She has worked for Sida a long time in various positions both in Sida’s headquarter and in the field, covering education as well as other thematic issues. She has had insight into Sida’s support to primary education for almost two decades.

**Respondent 2**
The second respondent is a former diplomat who worked in a number of different positions within the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, especially on matters of ODA to education.


**Respondent 3**
The third respondent is a former Sida employee who has now left the agency from a senior directorial position. He has been in charge of Sida’s education unit and thus had first-hand insight of Sida’s ODA to education, both bilateral and multilateral.

**Respondent 4**
The fourth respondent is a retired, former head of Sida’s education unit. As with respondent 3, she was in charge of Sida’s overall ODA to education. She is a long-time employee with Sida and had worked in several other positions over the years, both in the field and in headquarters.

**Respondent 5**
The fifth respondent is a retired, former employee of Sida who had worked on educational issues for several decades with Sida. He did not have managerial position but worked at Sida’s education unit for a very long time, having experienced the changes of ODA over a long time-period.

**Respondent 6**
The sixth respondent has been at the forefront of Sweden’s ODA to education since the 1960s. He is retired but has continued his involvement in educational issues. He oversaw Sida’s education department for many years.

**Respondent 7**
The seventh respondent is working with ODA policy at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. He is also a former Sida employee but does not have extensive experience from ODA to education before his current position.

**3.4 Ethical considerations**
A critical consideration when conducting an interview-based study is ethics. Teorell and Svensson (2007) offer some guidelines to maintain research ethics: information requirement, consent, confidentiality, and use of data. It is necessary when gathering data involving individual stakeholders, especially when they are directly involved in the research, that the researcher explains the purpose of the research. Another key component in maintaining high
research ethics is the consent by interview respondents to participate in the study and share information. Confidentiality is another necessary consideration, meaning that information about the respondents and the data gathered from these interviews are handled with utmost care and caution. The last component to consider in order to maintaining research ethics, as proposed by Teorell and Svensson, is that information and data gathered about individual respondents only is used for the purposes of this study.

The four components of research ethics as proposed by Teorell and Svensson have influenced the preparation and execution of the data collection in this study. The respondents were all informed about the study and its purpose and asked if they agreed to participate having been presented with the background and purpose. The respondents were also informed how the data will be treated and used. The respondents were also asked if they agreed to be named in the study or preferred to stay anonymous. Although a majority of respondents agreed to be named, all of them will be kept anonymous as to not cause any harm to those who are still working for Sida and the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. Although not naming the respondents may harm the reliability of the study, the ethical considerations are prioritized.

### 3.5 Validity and reliability of the study

Validity and reliability are at the centre of the critique against qualitative research, and it is debated whether or not qualitative research should be assessed in the same manner and with the same criteria as quantitative research at all (Bryman, 2012). Some argue that it is in the nature of qualitative social sciences to be difficult to replicate and to validate, as this research is concerned with an ever changing social and political context (Theorell and Svensson, 2007). The problems of validity and reliability are obviously inherently difficult to address, but there are some measures that can at least mitigate these issues. For instance, in regard to validity, a strong theoretical stance and point of departure is to prefer and an intense case study is an example of research design that lends itself towards testing theory rather than generalizing about the social context being studied (Bryman, 2012).

Addressing the lacking reliability is perhaps even more difficult and requires a solid understanding of the current context at the time of the study, to make it possible for someone else to replicate the circumstances of the study (ibid). As mentioned before, the reliability of the study is harmed by the fact that respondents are anonymized due to ethical considerations.
However, because they are all presented as to what their professional background and current setting is, there is a possibility to replicate the study to some extent seeking out these professional profiles. In sum, using other methods and methodological approaches the validity and reliability could have been stronger. Nevertheless, it is possible to draw conclusions from the data collected and possible to replicate at least a similar study using the background and context provided.

3.6 Ontological and epistemological considerations

ODA, Sida and the Results Agenda are all social constructs of human ingenuity and can’t arguably be considered independent and external from social influence. This constructivist approach to ontology, that these three social phenomena are made up and continually reshaped according to social interactions and norms in society, is the opposite to an objectivist approach to ontology which instead is characterised by external facts independently existing without social constructions and norms (Bryman, 2012). While the ontological approach seems obvious for a case study of ODA and the Results Agenda from the perspective of a government agency, the epistemological approach is less straightforward. According to Lamont (2015), an interpretivist epistemology is concerned with understanding social meanings and constructions, while empiricist, or positivist, epistemology mainly is concerned with explaining a phenomenon through testing a hypothesis or established theory. This study is leaning towards a positivist epistemology as it is testing to what extent the Results Agenda, considered a theory in this case, can explain the decline of ODA to primary education. It seems then that there is a combination between a constructivist ontology and a positivist epistemology, a rather odd combination it seems but logical considering the social phenomena being studied and the purpose of the study, which is to explore to what extent the Results Agenda can explain the decline of Sweden’s ODA to primary education.
4. Empirical results

In this section, the empirical results from the case study are accounted for and related to the theoretical model of the Results Agenda presented earlier. The empirical results are structured using the three factors of accountability, development impact, and aid efficiency. Selected quotes by respondents are used to illustrate the vast amount of interview data.

4.1 Accountability

According to Brolin and Vähämäki, accountability was the main driving force for the increasing focus on results in the 2000s and from a Sida perspective, this meant accountability towards the government on the one hand and accountability to partners on the other. However, in the era of the Results Agenda, accountability towards the government had superiority. Accountability is a trickle-down construction and in the case of ODA, this means that Sida has accountability towards the government that in turn is accountable towards taxpayers. Thus, ODA is as much a domestic policy issue as other policy areas.

Although accountability is identified as a key factor of the Results Agenda, few respondents pointed out accountability as an important factor for why ODA to primary education has declined. However, when accountability was raised as an issue or factor, it was referred to as accountability to domestic actors, i.e., the government and in the end the taxpayers, rather than partners. It was clear from the respondents who raised the issue that as an employee of a government agency, you are first and foremost accountable to the government and Swedish taxpayers. The role of the public official is to spend taxpayer’s money wisely and efficiently.

The way to ensure accountability is to measure results and evaluate the effectiveness of individual programmes and projects. All seven respondents pointed out the fact that measuring results is not a new phenomenon in ODA, it has been a cornerstone of ODA management since the start and various results initiatives have been launched over the years with the same overarching goal; to increase effectiveness and efficiency of ODA and ensure accountability to Swedish taxpayers. This was reiterated by respondent 6, who has been involved in Sweden’s ODA since the 1960s:

Accountability was very important in development aid already from the beginning and the establishment of Sida was to ensure that taxpayer’s money did not go to the wrong things, like
corruption and dictatorships. So, measuring results and things like that is not a new idea, but perhaps it has been debated more in recent years. (Respondent 6).

The interview data however suggests that the theoretical model is correct in that accountability in ODA is first and foremost towards domestic actors, i.e., the government and taxpayers. The model is also correct in that accountability mainly entails spending taxpayer’s money efficiently. Respondents raised the importance of accountability to partners and that ODA should mainly be focused on making a difference in partner countries. However, the Results Agenda brought with it a major reorganization of Sida’s internal organization, but also the reporting system. Results-based management was promoted as the main instrument to achieve efficiency and accountability and measuring results became a cornerstone of Sida’s daily operations. Results-based management is a way of working that is focusing on measuring results throughout the process of ODA, from initiating a project to ending it and the main purpose of results-based management is to make sure that favourable results are achieved, otherwise the project can’t continue to operate. Results are used to maintain accountability throughout all processes, internally in the ways Sida work and externally vis-à-vis partners. The Results Agenda promotes results in order for Sida and the MFA to be able to evaluate ODA, which in turn is important in order to make partners, Sida and the government accountable to their respective authority.

Brolin (2017a, 2017b) and Vähämäki (2017) are reiterating the influence accountability has had over the Results Agenda and Brolin especially is arguing that accountability is at the core of the Results Agenda and could even be interpreted as the rationale of the Results Agenda in the first place. It is clear from the interview data that accountability is at the core of ODA, but it is however not explicitly stated by the respondents but rather implicitly in the way they describe the purpose of measuring results. Respondent 1 for instance stated that “you need to make the case for an initiative and why it is important and why it must continue.” This is supported by other respondents who argue that showing results, especially quantitative ones, is key for a project or programme to continue. The quantification of ODA results and the necessity of quick results, to have something to show for, became dominant.

The interview data also shows that the interconnection between the three factors presented in the model of the Results Agenda is strong, i.e., the interconnection between accountability, development impact, and aid efficiency. The trickle-down approach to accountability helps to
understand why ODA is managed the way it is in the Results Agenda era. The government is accountable to the taxpayers, which makes the government demand more accountability from Sida, and Sida in turn set the same demands for accountability from partners. The issue of partners’ ownership is sidestepped by the demands for accountability throughout the ODA process by showing results and making a development impact in partner countries. This accountability structure is described by respondent 3:

All government agencies are accountable towards the government and in the end the taxpayers. It is the same for Sida. In order for Sida to be able to show that aid works, we need to have results from partners. They are accountable for showing results and Sida are accountable for making sure the money taxpayers are contributing are well spent. (Respondent 3).

The sensitivity of handling taxpayer’s money is frequently referred to by the respondents, and it seems as if the increasing ODA budget, which is the result of the target that 1% of gross national income should be allocated to ODA annually, has led to demands from governments, both left and right, to increase Sida’s capacity to monitor and evaluate ODA.

The results from the interview data suggests that accountability, in accordance with Brolin (2017a, 2017b) and Vähämäki (2017), is a key factor in the Results Agenda and that respondents working for Sida especially are mindful of the fact that they may be accountable for the decisions they make. Another aspect not covered in the theoretical model that some of the respondents raised as important in the distribution of ODA is the political context both in Sweden, in regard to political priorities, and in partner countries where there are sensitivities in regard to the political context. One respondent, who has previously worked at the MFA, put it as follows:

It is very difficult to work with ODA in countries that are not democratic, are experiencing conflicts or other political crises. You don’t want the ODA to end up in the wrong hands, but this is of course very hard to guarantee, even for Sida. (Respondent 2).

Although this argument isn’t directly related to the Results Agenda, it is an issue of accountability yet again. The government and Sida are accountable for not letting ODA falling into the wrong hands. The problem with ODA to primary education is that it tends to be channelled to public institutions in partner countries, as education often is the domain of
governments, with few exemptions. According to respondent 2 and 6, ODA in general, and to education in particular, was previously channelled directly to governments in the form of direct budget support or sector specific support to governments in partner countries. Respondent 2 argued that budget support to governments in partner countries was a highly efficient way of distributing ODA and that it achieved positive results. However, budget support to governments in partner countries became a sensitive issue in ODA during the 2000s as it was perceived as supporting corruption and undemocratic states. Thus, direct budget support and sector specific support was phased out during the 2000s and early 2010s, which of course also affected bilateral ODA to primary education as this traditionally had been distributed directly to governments in some way or the other (respondent 6). In the end, the Swedish government was not willing to risk criticism from the Swedish public for being seen as supporting undemocratic and repressive governments in partner countries.

Here it seems to be a conflict between two core factors of the Results Agenda, namely accountability and aid efficiency. If budget support to governments in partner countries was highly effective and efficient, as argued by some respondents, the Results Agenda should have advocated for it. At the same time, accountability seems to be prioritised over aid efficiency in this case. This could be seen as a weakness of the theoretical model used in this study as it fails to fully explain this apparent dichotomy. But it might as well be a flaw, or perhaps more accurately an inherent conflict between accountability on the one hand and aid efficiency on the other that is irreconcilable no matter what theoretical model is being applied.

### 4.2 Development impact

The respondents who have worked mainly for Sida with ODA to primary education, all but two, spoke fondly of development impact and raised it as perhaps the most important aspect of ODA, the raison d'etre for ODA. It was clear from scanning the interview data that this was the primary reason for why they as individuals have been working with ODA in the first place and thus value above all else. However, when going through the interview data, it is equally clear that development impact in partner countries may not be the main concern in the everyday operations for these public officers.

The measurements presented in the model of the Results Agenda which includes a focus on short-term results of ODA, and a quantitative focus when measuring results of ODA, fit quite well into the reality of how the Results Agenda was implemented in the 2000s. The Results
Agenda favours quantitative measurements when monitoring progress of development projects and programmes. But the model seems to be lacking concerning the time-perspective for when results are expected. Yes, the Results Agenda advocates for a stronger focus on measuring results in general, but this includes both short-term and long-term results of ODA. The main concern of the Results Agenda in relation to measuring results is to measure results continuously and monitoring the progress more rigorously throughout the lifetime of a specific ODA project or programme.

When asked whether or not the increasing focus on measuring results of ODA was difficult in relation to primary education the answer from all respondents directly involved with this was no. On the contrary, education in general was argued to be perhaps the least difficult area to measure and monitor. This was described by respondent 4:

*It is in a way easy to work with development aid to education because it is easy to show results. Then of course it depends on what you measure and what you mean by results. It is much easier than many other development areas.* (Respondent 4).

Respondent 4 elaborated her thinking further regarding measuring the results of ODA to primary education. She argued that the increasing focus on results should have made the case for ODA to education, and she did not believe that support for primary education was harmed by the increased focus on measuring short-term results and long-term impact, because there are many metrics that are easy to measure and follow over time for education compared to many other thematic areas, including democracy and peacebuilding. This view was however not shared by all respondents. Respondent 5 pointed out that it is difficult to measure results of education in a short-term perspective. He argued that some results can be measured quite easily, such as net enrolment rate and gender ratio between girls and boys attending primary school, but other factors are more difficult to measure. These include the quality of education, learning outcomes and the long-term impact on the local community and economy that education brings. He continued to argue that investing in education and seeing results must be allowed to take time and that the Results Agenda, in its emphasising of short-term perspectives at the cost of long-term perspectives of development impact, in that way is discouraging long-term development impact.
It was clear from the interview data that the issue of development impact is the most dividing issue among the seven respondents and that their views make it difficult to draw clear conclusions of the Results Agenda’s influence over development impact. Nevertheless, there are some key similarities shared by all seven respondents. Firstly, the Results Agenda has indeed meant a more stringent process for measuring, monitoring, and evaluating ODA. The processes internally at Sida were changed quite significantly in the late 2000s as a result of the reorganization of the agency, leading to more focus on measuring results at the expense of Sida’s previous role as a policy and knowledge organization. Secondly, there is a sense by the respondents who have worked for Sida that there is a conflict between focusing on development results in partner countries on the one hand and focusing attention on constantly reporting results upwards to the government, i.e., a conflict between the interests of the partners and the interests of domestic stakeholders.

A majority of the respondents in this study are former and current Sida employees and thus, their perspective is dominant compared to respondents from the MFA. This is natural of course as Sida has had, and still has, more people directly involved in ODA to primary education while the MFA only has one focusing on the education portfolio, as well as other thematic areas. Nevertheless, two of the respondents offer a different perspective from the ones who have worked for Sida. The MFA is representing the government and is therefore also in charge of formulating policy directives to be followed by Sida. However, Sida has significant influence over the formulation of these strategy documents. Respondent 7, who is working for the MFA, emphasised that Sida has a lot of influence of how ODA is distributed in the end. Yes, the government, through the MFA, is setting strategic goals for Sweden’s ODA and how it should be managed by Sida, as the implementing arm, but the MFA is not making detailed decisions about how ODA should be allocated. MFA is only managing core contributions, i.e., budget support, to multilateral agencies but is not making decisions in individual programmes and projects. This is a core government principle, that a ministry or indeed an individual minister should not control individual ODA allocations like that, according to respondent 7. The respondent express it as follows:

*The government sets the strategic direction of Sweden’s ODA, but it is mainly Sida that is allocating funds according to the government’s overarching priorities. (Respondent 7).*
The difference between the MFA’s view and Sida’s view, according to the interview data of this particular study, shows that there are not necessarily explicit directions that control Sida and ODA allocations but that there might be a perception, especially from Sida employees, that the government is controlling ODA more than it actually does. According to the two MFA representatives interviewed for this study, the government is setting development priorities that Sida is tasked to deliver on. The Sida representatives interviewed agree with this in principle, but simultaneously argue that the increasing focus on results and measuring development impact leads them to focus more on ‘quick wins’ and quantitative measurements as they need to report progress to the government, rather than focusing their attention to development impact in partner countries.

To summarize, in regard to development impact there seems to be two differing pictures painted by Sida on the one hand and the MFA on the other. There is nevertheless agreement between all respondents that the Results Agenda has led to development impact being measured differently and that this may have led to reprioritisation of ODA, including to primary education.

### 4.3 Aid efficiency

Aid efficiency is a recurring topic circled back to by respondents who worked for Sida and it is one time-period they refer to in the late 2000s starting 2007-8 as particularly important in regard to the increasing focus on results and efficiency of internal Sida operations. The focus on results was not something new however and increasing efficiency has always been a part of Sida’s mission, according to respondent 3 who has also worked in top managerial positions within Sida. But the late 2000s was a time of radical change in how Sida operates according to respondents working for Sida at the time. The most striking development, which started in in 2007-8 was the overall reorganization of Sida’s organizational structure, from being thematically organized to becoming a management organization. The purpose of this reorganization was to build a leaner and more efficient organization focused on managing ODA rather than the previous focus on policy development and thematic expertise. As part of this reorganization, the thematically organized departments were dismantled and replaced by management-focused departments. This included the unit for education which consisted of around 15 people at the time, according to respondents 1 and 3. These thematically organized units were responsible for a number of projects and programmes and many of the people
working in these thematic units had extensive experience and expertise in their specific thematic area.

After this reorganization, the number of countries where primary education was a priority decreased substantially, a process that had already started prior to 2008, however, but was accelerated in the late 2000s and early 2010s. The number of countries where primary education, or indeed any level of education, was a priority shrunk during the 2000s and 2010s from around 30 to only a couple today, according to respondent 1 and 6. The number of individual initiatives focusing on primary education has fallen significantly as well, from 71 in 2000 to 7 in 2021 (Openaid, 2021f).

A new Director-General of Sida was appointed by the government during this same period to oversee this major reorganization and a lot of staff had to either leave the organization or were relocated within it in order to make good on the promise to make the agency leaner and more efficient. The reorganization also led to a decentralization of operations and decision-making regarding individual projects to Swedish embassies in partner countries, also leading to more Sida staff working in the field rather than in the headquarter.

The two measurements for aid efficiency provided by the model, i.e., a more focused and targeted ODA, and a leaner and more efficient internal organization seems to fit well into the view of the respondents who argue that the narrowing focus of ODA and the internal reorganization has affected how ODA is being prioritized, not least bilateral ODA. As a direct result of this, primary education has been deprioritized as a thematic focus area at country level, i.e., in the bilateral ODA. Nevertheless, it is not necessarily because primary education is seen as less important but rather that the policy of a more focused and targeted ODA did not have room for as many thematic priorities as earlier in bilateral ODA focusing on specific countries. This is a view shared by all respondents, and illustrated in this quote by one of the respondents:

_I believe that the increasing focus at country level has led to less areas being prioritised. So, education is not necessarily unimportant, but you have to choose only three areas and education probably is in fourth place in many countries._ (Respondent 5).
What is referred to here is a development that originated as long back as the 1990s, with a strategic decision by the government to focus on less thematic areas in the partner countries, from several thematic areas down to three in most partner countries (respondent 2 and 6). This may help explain the significant decline of primary education as a priority in many countries. In combination with the 2008 reorganization and efficiency overhaul of Sida with fewer partner countries overall likely contributed to the significant decline of support to primary education on a bilateral level. A simultaneous development during the 2000s was the establishing of the EFA FTI, which later became the GPE, where Sweden was a driving force, according to respondent 1 and respondent 2. The EFA FTI was established as a funding mechanism where donors pooled financial resources being distributed to partner countries. This has continued with the rebranding of the EFA FTI to the GPE which is the main multilateral financial and coordination mechanism for supporting education in poor countries. According to respondent 4, Sweden was one of the main initiators of the GPE as a follow up from a string of meetings and international agreements in the 1990s and early 2000s to increase funding for primary education. Another reason for the formation of the GPE is the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000 where access to primary education was a central goal. In order to achieve the MDG target for all children to achieve a primary education by 2015, the overall funding for primary education in poor countries needed to increase substantially (respondent 4). Respondent 4 frequently referred to various data on Openaid.se, the official aid transparency portal for Swedish ODA. However, available data is limited and only shows the allocations to GPE from 2012 onwards, and not its predecessor EFA FTI. The graph below nevertheless shows how Sweden has contributed significantly to the GPE since 2012:

GRAPH 2 Sweden’s contributions to the Global Partnership for Education. Source: Openaid (2021c).
In comparison to the increasing portion and amount of ODA to primary education being channelled through the GPE, ODA being channelled through public sector institutions declined significantly during the 2000s and since 2016, no ODA to primary education is channelled through public sector institutions in partner countries, as seen in the graph below:

GRAPH 3 Sweden’s ODA to primary education through public sector institutions Source: Openaid (2021d).

Also comparing ODA to primary education channelled through NGOs shows that a majority of ODA to primary education is channelled through multilateral organizations, mainly the GPE, and that NGOs are handling a fairly limited portion of the ODA intended for primary education.

GRAPH 4 Sweden’s ODA to primary education through non-governmental organisations and civil society. Source: Openaid (2021e).

The graphs showcased above, which were referred to by respondent 4, seems to be indicating that Sweden prefers to channel ODA intended for primary education through multilateral channels. The most apparent realisation from the data in the graphs however is the reluctance
to support primary education though public institutions, i.e., government institutions, in partner countries which according to, among others, respondent 6 was the preferred channel to support primary education two to three decades ago.

Summarizing the data related to aid efficiency, there are two major changes in the 2000s that seems to have contributed to a decline of Sweden’s ODA to primary education. The first one is the shift towards pooling resources in the then newly established multilateral funding and coordination instrument for primary education, the EFA FTI, later the GPE. The second significant change is the reorganization of Sida’s organizational structure which led to the dismantling of the education unit, among other thematic units. These two changes during the 2000s when Sida underwent a significant organizational shift, from being a knowledge and policy organization to a management agency were pointed out by several respondents, for example by respondent 2 as illustrated in this quote:

*Before, Sweden supported countries with knowledge transfer and we had a lot of thematic experts – engineers, doctors, and teachers – who worked with knowledge transfer to recipient countries. This changed after 2000 and onwards when Sida became an administrative organization that was focusing on managing ODA distribution.* (Respondent 2).

Comparing the interview data with the theoretical assumption of aid efficiency as a key factor in the Results Agenda shows that there seems to be a strong connection between the increasing focus on results and the decline of ODA to primary education, perhaps an even stronger connection than between declining ODA and accountability and development impact, at least this is suggested by the interview data.
5. Discussion

This is a limited case study of a subject that needs significantly more research in order to explain the many dynamics and aspects that might have influenced the decline of ODA to primary education. The results from this limited case study are however quite interesting and hints of a development that most likely can be seen in other thematic areas as well, not only primary education.

The results are based on a fairly simple model of the Results Agenda, which in turn is based on the extensive research conducted by other scholars about the role of the Results Agenda in Sweden’s ODA. It is clear that the model is working as an analytical tool to process data and its simplicity has made it easy to code the quite extensive interview material gathered in this study. However, the model is lacking in depth and could have been sharper in finding underlying dynamics of the Results Agenda in the empirical material had it been more elaborate. For a study of this scope, the model seems to be working sufficiently, nevertheless.

Relating the results of the case study to the previous research accounted for in section 1 in this study, it is possible to find some key similarities. The research conducted by Sjöstedt (2013) showed that there is a mismatch between the Results Agenda and the ownership of the development process by partner countries, i.e., donor interests are prioritised over partner interests. Although this case study does not directly explore the relationship between the Results Agenda and ownership by partner countries, it does to a certain extent support Sjöstedt’s claims that donors’ priorities, in this case their priority of measuring results and efficiency, is more important than partners’ ownership. The relationship between the interests of donors and those of partners is the focus of Brolin’s (2017a) research as well, and this inherent conflict between the Results Agenda and ownership is explored by several other scholars as well.

Another similarity between this case study and the previous research accounted for is the rationale of the Results Agenda, the reason for its existence in the first place. The model in this study is based on the research by Brolin (2017b) but it has similarities with other previous research as well, including the research conducted by Valters and Whitty (2017) who studied UK’s ODA from the late 1990s. They concluded that ODA became much more politicised as a policy area in the UK from the mid-2000s and that ODA became much more focused on
donor interests and results than previously (ibid). Their description is similar to the findings in this case study in that ODA has become increasingly politicised in Sweden as well, and that the Results Agenda is a way for the government to increase its control over ODA than previously.

The research by Kim (2016) offered another possible explanation for why ODA to a certain area might decline by focusing attention on the domestic policy debate regarding ODA. This was not the main focus for this case study and thus it was not reflected over as a possible explanation model. However, it was brought up by some of the respondents that the domestic debate about ODA priorities might be one explanation for why ODA to primary education has declined. This is likely not the main explanation however as support to primary education is supported across the political spectrum, which was also pointed out by one of the respondents.

The results of this case study indicates and hints of several interesting developments within ODA to primary education, but it provides few conclusive facts about why ODA to primary education has declined and the potential influence that the Results Agenda has had over this decline. The main takeaway from the study is that more research is needed in order to conclude whether or not the Results Agenda has led to a decline of Sweden’s ODA to primary education.

Although the Results Agenda in ODA is a fairly researched issue, previous large-scale research has tended to focus on the framing of the agenda itself, which has been very useful in order to form the theoretical foundation for this study, and not its implications of the Results Agenda on specific parts of the ODA. There are of course exceptions, including the research conducted by Sjöstedt (2013), but overall, there is a need to further explore how the Results Agenda has affected ODA in more practical terms. The relationship between the domestic policy agenda and ODA is another area where more research is needed. The perception is, judging by the results of this limited case study, that the domestic policy agenda and debate is increasingly affecting ODA and the domestic policy agenda will most likely become even more influential in ODA in coming years and decades, something highlighted by several respondents in this study.
6. Conclusions

The purpose of this study is to explore to what extent the Results Agenda has influenced the decline of Sweden’s ODA to primary education for the last two decades, by answering the following research question: “To what extent can the Results Agenda explain the decline of Sweden’s official development assistance to primary education since the early 2000s?”. Drawing from the empirical results accounted for earlier, there are some key conclusions to be made about the influence the Results Agenda has had over Sweden’s ODA to primary education. The short answer to the research question is partly yes, the Results Agenda seems to have influenced the decline of Sweden’s ODA to primary education. However, the answer is more complicated than that.

First of all, the Results Agenda is difficult to define and describe. The research by Brölin and Vähämäki respectively offered a solid basis for constraining the theoretical model used in this study. Their research emphasised the three factors used in the model, but the model is not exhaustive in its interpretation of the Results Agenda. It draws on the main characteristics identified in their research but was not covering all aspects of the Results Agenda. The model could have been divided into more factors in order to enhance it as an analytical tool. However, it was decided that the model is sufficiently representative of the Results Agenda. And it is a pedagogical representation which makes it easier for a person not familiar with the Results Agenda to understand at least the basic ideas of it.

In order to give a more detailed answer to the research question the theoretical model is useful again to first conclude whether or not ODA has changed in accordance with the Results Agenda, i.e., has the Results Agenda penetrated procedures and decision-making regarding the allocation and prioritisation of ODA. The model now also includes a yes/no column which indicates whether or not the criteria can be considered met, i.e., if the interview data supports the notion that ODA has been influenced by the Results Agenda. This construction will help answer the research question.
Accountability to domestic stakeholders
The results of the case study suggest that accountability is an important factor in all ODA, including ODA to primary education. The Results Agenda led to a stronger focus on ensuring accountability, mainly by monitoring and evaluating ODA more frequently and stringent than previously done.

Focus on short-term results
The most inconclusive result from the interview data is whether or not ODA has become more focused on short-term results at the expense of long-term results. The interview data shows that the respondents are differing in their views whether or not ODA has become increasingly short-sighted. The conclusion is that the Results Agenda has put a stronger emphasis on results in general, both short-term and long-term results.

Accountability for spending efficiency
The results of the case study make it clear that a main concern for both the government and Sida is to spend ODA funds in a manner that deliver maximum possible development impact while being cost-efficient, which is very much in line with the Results Agenda.
Quantitative focus when measuring results of ODA
The results of the case study shows that the quantification of ODA, i.e., a focus on measuring results of ODA using mainly quantitative measures increased during the late 2000s, in line with other key developments during that period, being a key component of the Results Agenda.

More focused and targeted ODA
Reforms to make ODA more focused and targeted, i.e., having fewer partner countries and fewer thematic priorities per partner country, were initiated before the major reforms in the late 2000s. However, this process was accelerated during that period.

Leaner and more efficient internal organization
The major reorganisation of Sida in the late 2000s, which was covered extensively in the interview material, was a direct result of the mission to make Sida organisationally more efficient and leaner.

Overall, the results of the case study strongly suggest that the Results Agenda was in fact dominating Sweden’s ODA in the late 2000s and early 2010s. Although this may not be disputed, it seems appropriate to present the evidence for the existence of the Results Agenda gathered from this case study.

The results of the case study suggest that there is a connection between the rise of the Results Agenda during the 2000s and the decline of Sweden’s ODA to primary education, however only in the number of partner countries where primary education is a key thematic priority and not in the total amount of ODA to education. The most conclusive result is that ODA to primary education has been redistributed from mainly bilateral ODA through public institutions in partner countries to multilateral ODA channelled through multilateral entities such as the Global Partnership for Education in order to increase efficiency and focus ODA on fewer thematic areas and fewer partner countries. Although the results of the study suggest that the Results Agenda has influenced the decline of Sweden’s ODA to primary education, it is most likely not the sole reason for this decline. There are likely other factors that have contributed to this decline.
This case study is based on a limited data set of seven interviews, although with key individuals with unique experience and insight into Sweden’s ODA to primary education stretching over several decades. Further research of the subject of the Results Agenda and its impact on ODA allocations, based on a larger data set and covering a longer time period, would most likely find other underlying dynamics that have influenced ODA apart from the Results Agenda. The Results Agenda is often referred to as a bad thing among development practitioners and seen as harming development progress in partner countries. The conclusion of this limited case study however suggests that the Results Agenda in many ways has increased efficiency and long-term impact assessment, which should be considered beneficial for the long-term sustainability of ODA, both from a donor and from a partner perspective.

This case study is focusing its attention on the 2000s and early 2010s as this was a time period characterised by a major reorganisation of Sida and introduction of the Results Agenda as the guiding principle for Sweden’s ODA. In recent years however, the Results Agenda is still influential but not as prominent as in the decade prior, mainly due to the overwhelming critique from many development practitioners. Nevertheless, there are no doubts to whether the Results Agenda has influenced Sweden’s ODA at its core. Another key development not considered in this limited case study is the global education crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic which has led to tens of millions of children being out of school for a long time, of which many will never return to school. This will most likely influence ODA to primary education in the coming years, leading to renewed commitments by donors and increased funding for primary education in the poorest countries which have been hardest hit by school closures.
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Interview with respondent 5, conducted April 6th, 2021.
Interview with respondent 6, conducted April 9th, 2021.
Interview with respondent 7, conducted April 23rd, 2021.