

SMC's perception of development and theory of change

1. Background and purpose

The purpose of this policy is to describe SMC – Faith in Development's (SMC) overall perception of how change takes place with departure from our identity as a Christian mission council and civil society actor within international development cooperation¹. The policy describes our added value and relevance as a meeting place, advocacy actor, and forwarder of governmental funds for development cooperation; it clarifies important principles which are to guide our operations².

The policy has been developed by a working group at the SMC's office, with support from reference persons in the SMC's development committee and network. The policy is approved by the SMC Board of Directors and revised when necessary. The SMC's management team is responsible for regular follow-up and evaluation of the policy.

2. Faith is a force for change

Faith and conviction are powerful forces for change. World history contains many examples of this. As an expression of this force, we sometimes say that *faith can move mountains*.

SMC's vision is a world free from poverty and oppressive structures, where people can influence their situation and where God's creation is managed with responsibility for future generations. We want to create opportunities for people to participate in and shape their own development. Through meetings, collaboration and knowledge we can, together, create good conditions for sustainable change³.

¹ The text is written in "we-form" to signal the common ownership "we as the organisation SMC" have for the change theory and perception of development. Within this "we", the board, the secretariat and the member organisations have different roles and responsibilities. For example, as the member organisations have their own visions and theories of change this policy only guides the part with formal relevance to the SMC as an organisation.

² The policy thus applies both to the part of the SMC's activities financed with Sida funds and those that are financed from other sources, even if the Sida-funded part does not concern the church development or evangelism carried out by some of our member organisations.

³ See the SMC's statutes and value foundation

We are part of a tradition where faith and social commitment go together. We believe in a loving God who wants the best for people and the rest of creation. In the Christian grand narrative, we see a God who cares in a specific way for the most vulnerable. It describes God as the creator, reconciler, and mediator of hope. It also describes every human as being created in the image of God for freedom and community, with rights, empowerment and responsibility. Therefore, Christian faith can be a powerful driver for change and with impact on economic, political, ecological, social, cultural, and spiritual aspects of human life in society.

As a mission council, we perceive our mission, the task given to us, as part of God's mission in the world⁴. Our holistic approach⁵ means to love and serve, in word and deed, our world beyond ethnic, cultural and confessional boundaries through rights-based development cooperation, witness⁶, advocacy and networking. All of these functions constitute important parts of our mission and contribute in different ways to our vision.

Faith and conviction are important forces for change for all people. The right to freely choose and practice one's faith or belief is an important part of our work and a central part of human rights⁷. Our Christian identity is a constructive starting point for our learning from other traditions and worldviews in dialogue and cooperation. Faith and conviction can contribute to a positive social development by strengthening the social cohesion and through the creation of hope and commitment.

3. Our perception of development

Civil society at the centre of change

Our theory of change includes three groups of actors, where civil society is our focus. The other two agents of change are rights holders and duty bearers, who influence and are influenced by civil society. Civil society is heterogeneous and can accommodate both actors who promote and counteract democracy and sustainable development. At the same time, we see pluralism as a prerequisite for sustainable long-term change.

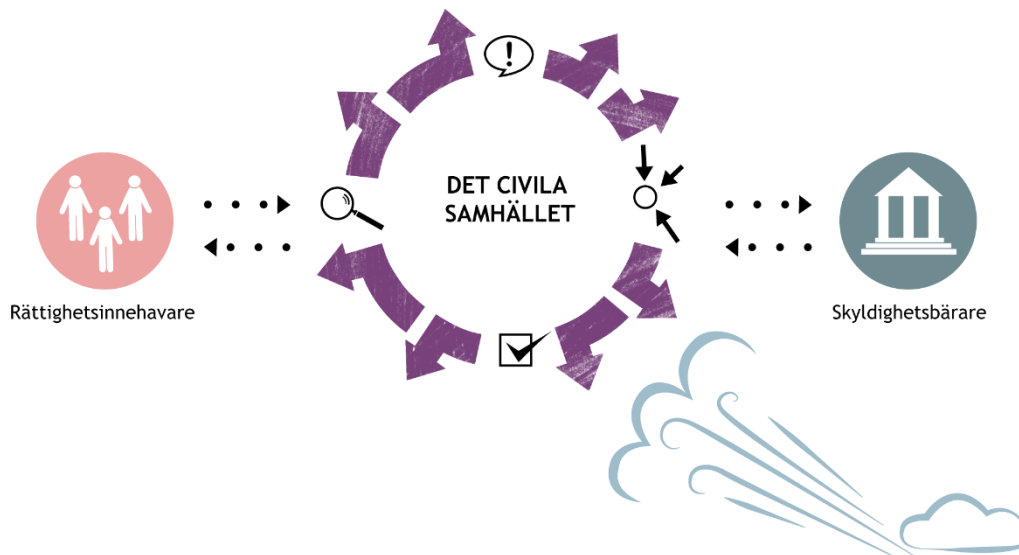
⁴ See SMC's statutes and value foundation

⁵ Three theological concepts – *Missio Dei*, *kairos*, *shalom* – can be said to summarise this holistic view: God's mission – *missio Dei* – is an accepted ecumenical term which departs from God's love for the world and his plan to reconcile both humans and creation. God is the number one agent of change and acts in history "when the time is right" – *kairos* (God's time) – and we are invited to be co-creators and co-changers. The goal is *shalom*, which is peace, joy, harmony, and established relationships, which is what characterizes the kingdom of God.

⁶ Testimony refers both to oral testimonies about God's love and the Christian faith, but also to show the same through actions.

⁷ See Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Article 18 of the UN Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

We see change as an ongoing process that we can contribute to through, for example, financial and technical support, partnerships, networking or long-term relationship building. The four stages of the change process are *awareness-raising*, *mobilisation*, *action* and *reflection*.



Schematic image of SMC's theory of change showing how civil society is central to our understanding of change and development. The wheel illustrates how change is an ongoing process. The four symbols in the wheel represent the four stages of the process: awareness-raising, mobilisation, action and reflection. The arrows in the wheel symbolise the diversity of civil society. The wind that makes the wheel turn is the support and cooperation that SMC gives and participates in, but it can also be seen as every person's commitment and driving force or as God's spirit.

Through support to civil society actors, we can contribute to mutual *awareness raising* among individuals, organisations and other actors concerning injustices and development obstacles. Under the right conditions, this leads to *mobilisation* and organisation in social movements as well as joint or individual constructive *action* for positive social change. People can acquire self-confidence, commitment, knowledge, understanding, trust, skills resulting in increased empowerment. Continuous change requires actors in civil society to *reflect* on the occurring changes and promote a culture of learning, where new perspectives have a self-evident place. Because of this process, civil society can defend democracy, monitor and demand rights, disseminate knowledge and create public opinion vis a vis the state and moral duty bearers.

A strong and pluralistic civil society is necessary to achieve a sustainable, just, equal and democratic society where people can influence their living situation and where human rights are respected, protected and fulfilled. Through our support of civil society actors, we help to create the conditions for people to organise and change their own world. That is one of our most important tasks.

Religious actors, such as churches and denominations, are important civil society actors, for better or worse. They are moral, and in many cases legal, duty

bearers⁸, but they are also actors with institutional rights. We see it as our special task to highlight the, sometimes overlooked, role of these actors in civil society.

Rights holders' perspective

We believe that every human being, created in God's image, has an inherent power to change. Every individual has dignity and rights, but we also see that people's lives are characterized by brokenness and shortcomings. Human beings are created for community and will always be dependent on others. Individuals with knowledge, motivation and networks have better possibilities to demand their rights, respect the rights of others and participate in and influence the development towards a just, peaceful and sustainable world.

We believe that the people who themselves are affected by unfair structures are the ones who are best suited to analyse, reflect and create change. In order to contribute to long-term sustainable change that remains relevant for future generations a diversity of actors must work together so that many perspectives and groups are included in decisions and actions. Regardless of whether one departs from a theological perspective or a rights-based approach, the SMC comes to the same conclusion: broad support and the contribution of many voices to the process are central aspects of sustainable change.

Strategic change through context and actor analysis

To act strategically against injustice, change agents must know their context and the social, cultural, economic, political and religious factors that influence it. For this reason, a nuanced and thorough context and actor analysis is an important starting point in all change work. The analysis shall depict norms and ideals, religion and ideology, attitudes and behaviours of actors, but also power relations and resistance strategies, obstacles, risks and opportunities. Above all, the analysis must identify what actors are important to collaborate with, demand responsibility from or influence in the concerned context.

Global frameworks and commitments

Sustainable change involves working for solutions to the common global challenges we face, including poverty in all its forms, inequality and discriminatory structures, climate change, environmental degradation, conflicts and injustices. This needs to be done within the framework of global commitments as specifically expressed in the 17 global sustainability goals of Agenda 2030, and in the UN's human rights framework. This framework includes numerous decisions, conventions and resolutions such as the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, as well as resolutions

⁸ In many countries, religious actors have the legal responsibility for family law issues.

such as 1325 on women's peace and security and resolution 2250 on youth, peace and security. Together, the 2030 Agenda and the UN Human Rights Framework constitute a common frame of reference for the dialogue between duty bearers, rights holders, and civil society on preferential types of societal change.

In our role as a civil society actor that we base our daily work on other global frameworks and agreements. We are members of the CHS Alliance⁹, and the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) principles for quality, effectiveness, and responsibility guide us in our development cooperation. We support the Istanbul Principles on Civil Society Development Effectiveness¹⁰, the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, and the Sendai Framework on Disaster Risk Reduction¹¹, which underlines resilience as one of four key focus areas.

As a mission council, the ecumenical documents that have been produced in various international forums are important for our holistic view of mission.¹²

Strength and motivation through bilingualism

In our work with change, we want to highlight religious literacy and the importance of religious actors. We want to create an understanding of development that focuses on human well-being, and which strives towards sustainable management of our common and finite resources. This includes the creation and maintenance of equal collaborations in our network while working against the traditional power structures which often have characterised international aid. Religious actors often have high levels of legitimacy at different levels of society and can have a great influence on how people think and act. Providing an opportunity for theological reflection on human rights, based on interpretations from different religious traditions, can contribute to a deeper understanding and preparedness for change among duty bearers, rights holders and civil society actors.

We see the ability to speak both a rights-based and a theological language as a strength. These two languages are different but can still be coherent and mutually supportive. We work with a diversity of actors across the world and can draw inspiration, as well as find common driving forces, in both the Christian faith and in a rights-based way of working. Both languages motivate us to work in a non-discriminatory, inclusive, transparent and accountable manner, as well as to demand accountability, in order to enable the broad and active participation of people regardless of religion or belief.

⁹ Read more about [CHS Alliance](#)

¹⁰ Read more about [the Istanbul Principles](#)

¹¹ Learn more about [the Sendai framework](#)

¹² Two of these are *Together for Life* and *Christian Witness in a Multireligious World*.

4. Key principles for change and sustainable development

Together the principles listed below constitute important starting points for how we as a network should work for change and sustainable development at the local and the global level.

Participation

Every person has the right to participate in processes and decisions which affect their life situation. Active participation, accessible to a wide range of societal groups and actors, leads to a greater understanding of different perspectives and experiences, and thus also to better, more informed and more sustainable decisions. For example, in social development processes the agency of children and young people is often overlooked, even though they make up a large part of the population in many countries. Active participation therefore means that children and young people have a real opportunity to have their say and contribute with their perspectives.

Link to human rights obligation

Planning and justification for activities and expected results should refer to global and national frameworks for human rights and sustainable development. This shows that the activities are based on the experiences and joint commitments of many actors. It also helps other actors in the collaboration to recognise themselves in the language and concepts used.

Accountability

Rights holders and other actors in civil society have the right to demand accountability from the state, authorities and other power holders such as companies, development actors, and individuals. In particular, this applies to legal duty bearers and actors who are entrusted power, such as politicians, the judiciary, and religious leaders at different levels. They have a great responsibility and must be prepared to answer for their actions and decisions. Therefore, accountability is an important objective for civil society, as well as awareness raising and support to rightsholders in claiming their rights. Better accountability can be achieved by engaging, cooperating with, and build new knowledge among duty bearers.

Non-discrimination and equality

All forms of discrimination must be prevented and eliminated within all operations and development cooperation. Discrimination can take place based on e.g. gender, transgender identity or expression, age, religious or belief affiliation, disability, sexual orientation, ethnicity, origin, socioeconomic status, health

status etc. Those who face the greatest obstacles to having their rights fulfilled must be prioritised, included and allowed to make their voices heard in social development processes. An intersectional approach, in which several aspects of identity are analysed, clarifies how several grounds for discrimination interact and reinforce each other but also the existing power relations *within* groups, for example within the group of women or the group of Christians.

Empowerment

An individual or group should have the power and ability to influence their own and others' life situations, and duty bearers should be able to support this process. Civil society should focus on awareness raising and education on human rights, how to claim them, and encourage democratic participation. Focus should also be on strengthening duty bearers' capacity to fulfil their duties e.g. making sure authorities enforce human rights norms effectively and provide sufficient resources to maintain the empowerment of rights holders. The fifth global goal of Agenda 2030 highlight the need to empower all women and girls.

We want to highlight the importance of religious narratives for people's experience of empowerment. In the Christian tradition man is invited and empowered by God to be a co-creator.

Transparency

Information must be available to those affected and rights holders must have the opportunity to participate in and monitor processes that affect them. Transparency is important for mutual accountability, the counteracting of corruption and the strengthening and maintenance of public trust in development actors and societal institutions. It must be easy and accessible for rights holders and other actors to report suspicions of irregularities, for example through a complaints management system, and all suspicions must be carefully followed up.

Capacity development and learning

Continuous capacity development and conscious learning methods are required if individuals, organisations and communities are to achieve their own development goals and strategies. This happens through varied forms of training, practical experience and experience exchanges with other actors. External evaluations, organisational assessments and audits can help development actors to identify and prioritise which capacity-building efforts are needed in the short and long term.

Equality

A rights-based gender analysis helps to identify the positive and negative consequences that different decisions and choices have on various social groups,

and consequently also what change agents can do to conduct an as power- and gender-conscious work as possible. An active gender equality work which contributes to reduced discrimination and increased justice shall permeate all work.

Religious literacy

Religious literacy is a fundamental ability to understand that religion and worldviews affects society and its development. It is about affirming religion and worldview as both explanatory and change producing factors, without diminishing or magnifying their significance, and understanding how they interact with other factors in the contexts where one operates. Development actors who want to work rights-based need to understand and relate to religious institutions and power structures, but also to the worldviews of individuals and the right to freedom of religion or belief. Theological reflection and conversations about faith as a driving force are important factors to create change in the contexts where we work.

Conflict sensitivity

Conflict sensitivity means understanding that work for change always affects conflict dynamics in the context, also in times of peace. This applies to humanitarian work, long-term development cooperation, and peacebuilding. With a conflict-sensitive approach, operations can be planned and implemented systematically, minimizing negative effects that might either escalate a conflict or generate new conflicts. At the same time, it also contributes to strengthened local capacities for conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

Local ownership

Working to achieve a world free from poverty and oppressive structures requires an understanding that the world in which we operate is a result of historical colonialism, racism and discriminatory practices. Missionary and aid work was formed under these structures, and we as a network need to work actively to counteract the tendencies that still exist in both spheres. It is about identifying the causes, and consequences, of the unfair distribution of power that exist within our ecosystem of actors. Faith-based actors need to review their relations with those in power and the possible support they give to oppressive structures. Such an insight is necessary in order to actively counteract injustice, even when such relations might benefit one's own interests. A way forward is to ensure local ownership, where those affected can also influence the development of their community. We therefore support development initiatives that focus on joint learning and exchange of experience rather than a traditional relationship between donor and recipient.

Trusting partnerships

Trust is essential for a meaningful exchange of experience, effective development cooperation, peaceful, equal and just societies and for the fight against corruption and abuse of power. Transparency, openness and learning facilitate and strengthen partnerships and collaborative relationships. Several of our member organisations have deep relationships with their partners that are based on a common identity and beliefs. These relationships sometimes stretch far back in time. This creates unique conditions for trust and mutual learning. Trust includes courage to point out shortcomings and areas for improvement and to know your partners' identity, role in civil society, guiding values, visions and activities, as well as being able to monitor agreement compliancy from all parties.

Networking

Civil society actors need to learn from the knowledge and experiences of others to stand up against injustices and make well-informed decisions. In networks, actors can collaborate with each other to gain social support and a stronger voice in advocacy work, and at the same time be challenged to improve their own organisation and strengthen their relevance as a civil society actor. Networks can inspire new ways of working and important knowledge. Having the opportunity to learn from other actors' mistakes, successes and experiences is a key aspect of efficiency and long-term sustainability.

Resilience

The environmental and climate crisis is one of the greatest challenges of our time, multiple planetary boundaries already passed. The consequences are increasing vulnerability, poverty, and inequality. Development initiatives always need to take environment and climate issues, and the resilience of societies into account. It is important to be prepared for changing conditions, to be a learning organisation that continuously analyses the context and adapts its focus and activities to a changing reality. Poverty and vulnerability are increasingly concentrated to contexts affected by armed conflicts, natural disasters, vulnerability and complex long-term crises. Multiple crises linked to the environment, climate, reduced biodiversity and health will affect the world in ways we cannot yet predict but which we must be able to adapt to. Those of us who have contributed least to the problems are often those who are hit hardest by crises, shocks and uncertainties. The world is our common responsibility, but those of us who have the greatest impact should also take the greatest responsibility for management and action.

5. Operationalisation and practical application

We operationalise this policy and its guiding principles in strategies for our activities, thematic and organisational policies, guidelines for each grant in our operations, assignment descriptions for meeting places and evaluations, as well as in internal learning and competence development.

Adopted by SMC's Board of Directors on 23 September 2021, revised February 2025