



So, What Are We?

Redefining the role of Swedish Civil Society in the Context of the 2024 Swedish
Aid Reform

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Abstract

Swedish development aid has recently undergone a major transformation, shifting from a historically expansive commitment to international development aid toward a more geopolitically oriented policy emphasizing regional proximity, migration management, and reduced overall spending. As part of the 2024 Sida reform, long-term agreements with seventeen Swedish civil society organizations (CSOs) were terminated, significantly reshaping the relationship between the Swedish state and civil society within development cooperation.

Addressing this gap, this thesis asks: *How do the Swedish government and Swedish CSOs discursively construct the role of civil society in development aid in the context of the 2024 Sida reform?* Guided by an interpretivist epistemology and a qualitative research design, the study conducts a discourse analysis of government documents, reform agendas, debate articles, open letters, and public statements produced during 2024. The analysis draws on Discursive Institutionalism supported by Organizational Legitimacy Theory.

The findings show that the Swedish government and CSOs construct fundamentally different understandings of the role and legitimacy of civil society in development cooperation. Government discourse emphasizes efficiency, accountability, measurable results, and alignment with state-defined priorities, whereas CSOs frame civil society in terms of solidarity, democratic values, long-term partnerships, and responsibility toward vulnerable populations and local partners. The study demonstrates how the 2024 Sida reform reflects a broader institutional renegotiation of civil society's role within Swedish development aid.

Keywords

Civil Society Organisations, Official Development Assistance, Aid Reform, Discursive Institutionalism, Organizational Legitimacy

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Definitions

Civil Society Organization (CSO): Non-profit organizations, groups, or institutions that operate independently from government and pursue humanitarian or development objectives (UNDP, n.d.).

Official Development Assistance (ODA): Government-provided aid designed to promote economic development and welfare in developing countries (OECD, 2025).

Sida: An acronym for *Styrelsen för internationellt utvecklingssamarbete*, the Swedish government agency responsible for managing Sweden's international development cooperation and aid efforts (Government of Sweden, 2015).

Discourse: The use of formal written or spoken words to exchange ideas and thoughts (Britannica, 2026).

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Civil society organizations (CSOs) play a crucial role in welfare provision and civic life, operating within broader social, political, and economic structures (Salamon and Anheier, 1998). CSOs are non-governmental, non-profit organizations operating between the state and the private sector, ranging from large international development organizations to local community groups. In the context of international development, CSOs have historically been valued as bridge-builders between donor governments and communities in the Global South, applying local knowledge that state actors often cannot (Banks, Hulme and Edwards, 2015).

In Nordic countries like Sweden, CSOs have historically maintained close and cooperative relationships with the state, with public funding playing a central role in shaping how organizations operate and what priorities they pursue (Arvidson et al., 2018). While this closeness has enabled stable and long-term cooperation, it also carries risks. Research on Swedish CSOs shows that dependence on public funding can lead organizations to hold back criticism of public authorities, prioritizing the preservation of funding relationships over their advocacy role (Arvidson et al., 2018).

For decades, Swedish development cooperation was built around a strategic partnership model in which the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) channeled significant portions of official development assistance (ODA) through seventeen Swedish CSOs. This model enabled long-term programming based on the principles of local ownership and people-to-people solidarity (Sida, 2024).

In December 2023, the Swedish government announced a major change to this model through its reform agenda: *Bistånd för en ny era, Frihet, Egenmakt och hållbar Tillväxt* (Regeringen, 2023). The reform redirected Swedish ODA toward geopolitical priorities and introduced trade and migration management as core objectives of Swedish aid. In March 2024, this led Sida to terminate all multi-year agreements with its seventeen strategic partner organizations (SPOs), effective December 2024 (CONCORD Sverige, 2024) alongside a reduced annual aid budget of SEK 53 billion for 2026-2028. (Regeringen, 2024).

The affected organizations publicly contested the reform, arguing that it undermined CSO independence, violated internationally recognized principles of effective development cooperation (OECD, 2025), and redirected aid away from the world's poorest countries toward Swedish domestic political priorities. What emerged was not simply a disagreement over budget cuts, but a deeper conflict over competing ideas about what civil society is and what role it should play in development aid. This conflict over ideas matters because the way political actors talk about and justify institutions is part of how those institutions are created, maintained, and changed. Language and argumentation not only reflect political reality, but actively shape it (Schmidt, 2008). The 2024 Sida reform therefore represents a significant moment of disruption in which the shared understanding that had underpinned the Swedish state-CSO partnership model is being openly challenged and renegotiated.

While the relationship between Swedish CSOs and the state has received scholarly attention (Arvidson et al., 2018), the way in which this relationship is being discursively contested following the 2024 reform remains unstudied. This thesis seeks to address that gap by analyzing how the Swedish government and Swedish CSOs construct and communicate competing ideas about the role of civil society in development aid in the context of the 2024 Sida reform.

1.2 Purpose and research question

Given the limited scholarly attention paid to how institutional disruptions are discursively negotiated in donor-country contexts, this study examines how the Swedish government and Swedish CSOs construct competing understandings of civil society's role in development aid following the 2024 Sida reform. A qualitative approach is employed using discourse analysis of publicly available documents, guided by Vivien Schmidt's (2008) framework of Discursive Institutionalism (DI) as the primary theoretical lens and Suchman's (1995) typology of Organizational Legitimacy as a secondary analytical tool, to uncover how meaning-making shapes institutional relationships in a moment of policy reorientation. In examining how these constructions diverge and compete, the study also aims to contribute to the broader literature

on state-civil society relations and ideational contestation in development cooperation. To guide this study, the following research question is posed:

How do the Swedish government and Swedish CSO's discursively construct the role of civil society in development aid in the context of the 2024 Sida reform?

1.3 Delimitation

This thesis examines how the Swedish government and Swedish CSOs discursively construct the role of civil society in development aid in the context of the 2024 Sida reform. While we recognize that the reform has affected a wide range of actors, including foreign partner organizations and communities in recipient countries, this study intentionally focuses on the discursive positions of the Swedish government and the seventeen Swedish CSOs that held strategic partnerships with Sida prior to the reform. This decision is based on the fact that these organisations were the formal SPOs within Sida's previous civil society funding model and therefore constituted the Swedish state's primary civil society counterparts in the implementation of development cooperation (CONCORD, 2024). Research on state-civil society relations shows that long-term funding relationships often create institutional interdependence and position CSOs as key intermediary actors between donor states and broader civil society networks (Banks, Hulme and Edwards, 2015; Arvidson and Linde, 2021). The former SPOs are therefore particularly relevant for analysing how the reform is discursively negotiated at an institutional level.

With respect to empirical material, this study is delimited to publicly available documents produced by the Swedish government and the seventeen former Sida CSOs that held strategic partner agreements with Sida prior to the 2024 reform, all of which are formally registered in Sweden and primarily engaged in international development cooperation (Sida, 2024). The material includes documents published between March 2024, when Sida communicated the termination of these agreements, and December 2024, when they formally ended. This time frame captures the period of active institutional disruption (Schmidt, 2008), during which both the government and the CSOs were most directly engaged in articulating and contesting the purpose and legitimacy of the reform.

Although CSOs vary in their degree of private funding, this study does not compare organisations based on funding composition. Such variation is acknowledged as a contextual factor that may shape organisational responses, but it is not the analytical focus of the thesis. The government's position is represented through a single policy document, while the CSO material consists of numerous public statements from seventeen organisations. This reflects the actors' different discursive roles rather than a sampling choice. Governments communicate reform through authoritative policy documents, whereas CSOs, lacking institutional authority to set policy, respond through multiple communicative channels. The asymmetry is therefore structurally inherent.

Finally, while a DI approach allows for rich analysis of how ideas and arguments are constructed, it does not allow us to make claims about the material consequences of the reform for affected organizations or communities, nor about the actual intentions of the actors involved. The analysis is limited to what is expressed in publicly available documents, and findings should be interpreted accordingly.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Civil Society and The State in the Nordic Context

In Nordic countries, civil society has historically developed in close interaction with the state, forming institutionalised and cooperative relationships rather than oppositional ones (Henriksen, Strømsnes and Svedberg, 2019).

Sweden represents a paradigmatic case of this arrangement, where civil society is embedded within broader governance structures often participating in welfare provision and policy implementation (Scaramuzzino and Wenerhag, 2015; Arvidson and Linde, 2021). This embeddedness reflects broader civil society regimes in which organisations are integrated into corporatist or social-democratic institutional settings rather than positioned as external challengers (Rakar and Kolaric, 2025). The state-civil society relationship in Sweden has consequently been characterised by a high degree of mutual dependence, with public funding constituting a primary source of income for many organisations (Salamon and Anheier, 1998).

While this close relationship enables stability and long-term collaboration, it also produces tensions. Public funding dependency can constrain advocacy and organisational autonomy, as organisations may adapt their priorities to align with donor expectations (Neumayr, Schneider and Meyer, 2013; Arvidson and Linde, 2021). This creates structural tension between independence and financial sustainability that is particularly pronounced in development-oriented CSOs. Moreover, governments increasingly exercise control over civil society through regulatory frameworks, including restrictions on foreign aid flows to CSOs, which shape the conditions under which organisations can operate (DeMattee, 2019)

Importantly, the relationship between civil society and the state is not only material but also ideational. It is shaped by ongoing negotiations over what civil society is and what role it should play (Banks, Hulme and Edwards, 2014). In the Swedish development cooperation context, this has historically been reflected in a partnership model where CSOs act as intermediaries grounded in both technical capacity and normative commitments to solidarity and local ownership.

2.2 Effect of Public Funding on CSOs

Public funding influences CSOs not only financially but also organisationally and strategically. Arvidson and Linde (2021) conceptualise this relationship as one of resource dependence, where funders shape organisational behaviour through formal and informal mechanisms. These include reporting requirements, earmarked funding and performance frameworks, which function as forms of soft governance that constrain autonomy even when formal frameworks suggest a relationship of equality.

Different funding structures produce different organisational outcomes. Delascio (2025) shows that project-based funding constrains long-term planning and increases alignment with donor priorities, while core funding enables greater strategic autonomy. Similarly, the composition of public funding influences both organisational activities and advocacy strategies, with greater dependency associated with reduced critical engagement with public authorities (Neumayr, Schneider and Meyer, 2013).

Organisations respond to these pressures through adaptation. Scaramuzzino and Wennerhag (2015) show that funding changes and Europeanisation reshape organisational structures and priorities over time. De Los Mozos, Duarte and Ruiz (2016) highlight how revenue diversification strategies may introduce new constraints rather than straightforwardly increasing independence, as specialised funders may perceive diversification as a dilution of mission.

These dynamics contribute to broader processes of organisational hybridisation, where CSOs increasingly adopt managerial practices and logics traditionally associated with the market or state (Wijkström, 1997). This further complicates the distinction between civil society as an independent actor and as an implementing partner. This raises questions about whether the organisational identities of development CSOs remain genuinely distinct from those of the state funders on whom they depend.

2.3 Aid Reductions, Institutional Disruption and System Reorganisation

The literature on aid reduction provides insight into how organisations respond to changing funding landscapes. Aid reduction is not simply a matter of declining financial resources but involves the restructuring or withdrawal of institutionalised relationships between donors and civil society actors (Pallas, Anderson and Sidel, 2017). In such contexts, organisations must navigate financial constraints but also the loss of established roles, relational networks and the organisational routines built around them.

Appe and Pallas (2017) show that aid reduction processes require organisations to renegotiate their relationship with donors, while Arhin, Kumi and Adam (2018) demonstrate how CSOs adapt strategically to changing funding environments through organisational restructuring and identity reorientation. Appe (2017) further highlights how organisations in post-aid contexts reconfigure their strategies and identities when external funding declines, often drawing on alternative narratives of purpose to sustain legitimacy.

However, most of this literature focuses on gradual funding decline in aid-receiving countries rather than systemic reorganisation initiated by donor-country governments. The 2024 Sida reform represents a distinct case in which funding is not simply reduced but fundamentally restructured, replacing long-term strategic partnerships with competitive allocation mechanisms. This shifts stable institutional relationships into more uncertain and contingent arrangements requiring organisations to contest and renegotiate not only their funding but their institutional position and social role.

2.4 The Role of Civil Society in Development Aid

An important strand of literature examines how the role of civil society in development cooperation is constructed and contested. A central tension concerns whether CSOs should be understood as service-delivery implementers or as independent democratic actors with their own mandate (Banks, Hulme and Edwards, 2014). This distinction has direct implications for how their performance is evaluated and what institutional arrangements are considered appropriate.

Professionalisation and managerialization processes have led many development organisations to adopt technical and bureaucratic practices, potentially distancing them from their civil society roots (Wijkström, 1997). At the same time, increasing regulatory frameworks and governmental restrictions on CSO activity, including restrictions on foreign aid flows, can further constrain the space in which civil society operates and reshape what kinds of organisations are able to function effectively (DeMattee, 2019).

The emphasis on localisation adds another dimension to this debate. While directing aid to local actors is framed as enhancing ownership and effectiveness, it also challenges the intermediary role of donor-country organisations and may redraw the boundaries of legitimate civil society participation in development (Arhin, Kumi and Adam, 2018). This creates a situation where different actors invoke similar normative principles such as local ownership, democratic participation and effective aid, while advocating for fundamentally different institutional arrangements. The question of who legitimately speaks for civil society and in whose interests it operates, remains persistently challenged.

2.5 Identified Gaps

Despite extensive research on civil society, public funding and aid reduction, several gaps remain. Existing literature primarily examines the structural and organisational effects of funding changes, with limited attention to how such changes are discursively constructed and contested by governments and CSOs. Similarly, research on aid reduction largely focuses on organisations in aid-receiving contexts rather than donor-country CSOs navigating changes in their relationship with the state (Appel, 2017; Arhin, Kumi and Adam, 2018). Moreover, while the close relationship between the state and civil society has been widely documented (Banks, Hulme and Edwards, 2014; Arvidson and Linde, 2021), less attention has been paid to how this relationship is renegotiated during moments of institutional disruption and policy reform.

This study addresses these gaps by examining how the Swedish government and Swedish CSOs discursively construct the role of civil society in development aid in the context of the 2024 Sida reform.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Theoretical Approach

This study draws on Discursive Institutionalism (DI) as its primary theoretical framework, supplemented by Suchman's (1995) typology of Organizational Legitimacy as a secondary analytical lens. These perspectives allow us to analyze how the Swedish government and Swedish CSOs discursively construct the role of civil society in development aid in the context of the 2024 Sida reform.

DI is chosen because the study examines publicly available texts and government reform documents rather than organizational behavior or financial outcomes. What is at stake in these texts is not merely information transmission but the active construction of meaning: what civil society is, what it should do, and what relationship it ought to have with the state. DI is well suited to analyze this kind of ideational and discursive activity within an institutional context, rather than treating it as mere rhetoric. Suchman's (1995) legitimacy typology complements this by providing concrete analytical categories for identifying how organizations construct and defend their institutional position through discourse.

3.2 Schmidt's Discursive Institutionalism

DI, developed by Vivien A. Schmidt, constitutes what she identifies as a fourth "new institutionalism" alongside rational choice, historical, and sociological institutionalism (Schmidt, 2008, *Annual Review of Political Science*, 11). Unlike the other three, which treat institutions as relatively stable external structures constraining behavior, DI introduces the role of ideas and discourse in both sustaining and transforming institutional arrangements. DI perceives institutions not simply as external rule-following structures but as both structures and constructs internal to agents, maintained through ongoing ideational articulation and discursive contestation (Schmidt, 2008).

DI distinguishes between two core analytical dimensions: the *substantive* content of ideas and the *interactive* processes of discourse. Ideas operate at three levels of generality: specific

policies, broader programs that frame and justify those policies, and underlying philosophies that form the deepest normative assumptions of an institutional order (Schmidt, 2008). For this study, the most analytically relevant levels are the programmatic and philosophical, as both the government and CSOs articulate competing visions of the role of civil society and the nature of state-CSO relations, rather than debating specific funding mechanisms.

Ideas also take two forms: cognitive and normative (Schmidt, 2008). Cognitive ideas are claims about what is necessary or effective, for instance, that certain funding approaches produce more efficient aid outcomes. Normative ideas are claims about what is good or legitimate, for instance, that civil society must be independent of state funding to fulfill its democratic function. Both types are present in the empirical material and the analysis attends to both.

Discourse refers to the interactive processes through which ideas are communicated and contested. DI distinguishes between two forms: *coordinative* and *communicative* discourse:

3.2.1 Communicative Discourse

Communicative discourse involves the presentation and justification of policy ideas to a broader public audience (Schmidt, 2008). It serves to legitimize or challenge policies in the public sphere.

In this study, communicative discourse is expressed by both the government and CSOs. Government actors use it to justify the Sida reform through public-facing documents and narratives, while CSOs use public statements, open letters and position papers to contest or reframe the reform. These interventions advance both cognitive and normative claims, particularly around efficiency, legitimacy and civil society autonomy.

3.2.2 Coordinative Discourse

Coordinative discourse refers to interactions among policy actors involved in the formulation and implementation of policy, aimed at building internal consensus (Schmidt, 2008).

Here, the Swedish government's reform documents, such as *Bistånd för en ny era* (2023) and Sida's strategies, are primarily analyzed as coordinative discourse, as they construct and legitimize the reform within the policy sphere. However, coordinative discourse may also include interactions between government and CSOs, such as consultations, highlighting that it is not limited to a single actor.

3.3 Suchman's Organizational Legitimacy

As a secondary analytical lens, this study draws on Suchman's (1995) framework of Organizational Legitimacy. Suchman defines legitimacy as a socially constructed perception that an organisation's actions are appropriate, desirable or consistent with shared norms and values (Suchman, 1995). Legitimacy is therefore not treated as an objective quality, but as something actively constructed and maintained through discourse.

Suchman identifies three forms of legitimacy;

1. *Pragmatic legitimacy*, based on usefulness, effectiveness or self-interest.
2. *Moral legitimacy*, based on normative evaluations of whether an organisation's actions are "the right thing to do."
3. *Cognitive legitimacy*, based on taken-for-grantedness, where an organisation becomes perceived as natural or necessary within a system.

These forms of legitimacy are directly relevant to the Sida reform debate. Government discourse frequently draws on pragmatic legitimacy through arguments about efficiency, accountability and measurable results, while CSOs often rely on moral legitimacy through references to democracy, solidarity and human rights. The previous strategic partnership model itself can also be understood as having possessed cognitive legitimacy, since it had become institutionalised and largely taken for granted within Swedish development cooperation.

3.4 Integration of the Two Frameworks

The two frameworks are analytically complementary rather than overlapping. DI provides the macro-level architecture: it situates the analysis within an institutional context, distinguishes between government and CSO discourse structurally as coordinative versus communicative, and directs analytical attention to the cognitive and normative content of ideas. Suchman's (1995) legitimacy typology operates at a more granular, organizational level, providing specific categories for coding how CSOs argue for their position and functioning as a tool for the close reading of individual texts.

Concretely, the analysis proceeds in two moves. First, drawing on Schmidt (2008, 2010), the coordinative discourse of the government will be examined to identify the cognitive and normative ideas embedded in the reform, specifically what kind of institution Swedish aid cooperation is being reconstituted as. Second, drawing on both Schmidt and Suchman (1995), the communicative discourse of the CSOs will be examined to identify how they construct the purpose and legitimacy of civil society in development aid, and how their ideational claims relate to those embedded in the government's reform.

3.5 Scope and Limitations of the Framework

The theoretical choice determines what the study is able to capture and what it sets aside. DI is suited to analyzing publicly articulated ideas in institutional texts, but it does not provide access to the internal deliberations, material interests, or private strategic calculations that may also shape how CSOs respond to the reform. Accordingly, this study is limited to what organizations say publicly, not what they do organizationally or believe internally. This is a conscious and principled delimitation consistent with the study's document-analytical methodology and its focus on communicative discourse as defined by Schmidt (2008).

Furthermore, neither DI nor Suchman's (1995) framework resolves the question of whether the discourses examined here are sincere expressions of institutional values or strategic performances of legitimacy. This ambiguity is not a weakness of the framework but a

constitutive feature of discourse analysis: the analysis can reveal what is being argued and how, without claiming definitive access to intent.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Approach and Philosophy

4.1.1 The Research Assumptions

This study is grounded in a social constructivist epistemology, which assumes that reality is socially produced and shaped through historical, cultural, and contextual processes rather than existing as an objective and fixed entity. From this perspective, social phenomena are understood as emerging through interaction, interpretation, and shared meaning-making (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Burr, 2015). Knowledge is therefore regarded as contingent, situated, and context-dependent rather than universal or value-free (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Accordingly, the concept of civil society is not treated as a stable or predefined category, but as a socially constructed phenomenon whose meaning varies across actors, contexts, and discourses (Edwards, 2014; Cohen & Arato, 1992).

4.1.2 The Interpretivist Philosophy

Building on these assumptions, the study adopts an interpretivist research philosophy, which recognises that meaning is constructed through social interaction and shaped by context (Bryman, 2016). This makes it particularly suitable for examining how different actors discursively frame the role of civil society, as such framings are inherently subjective, politically situated and open to contestation.

It therefore enables an analysis of how the Swedish government and CSOs construct and communicate competing understandings of civil society in development aid. Rather than seeking to determine a single “true” definition, the focus is on understanding how different interpretations are produced, articulated and contested in the context of the Sida reform (Bryman, 2016).

This perspective also acknowledged that these constructions are shaped by political and institutional contexts, and that they reflect underlying assumptions about what civil society is and what it should do (Schmidt, 2008).

4.1.3 The Interpretative Approach

We adopt an interpretative approach, emphasising the importance of understanding how individuals construct and interpret their social reality. Rather than seeking objective truths, this perspective focuses on the meaning that actors assign to their experiences and interactions (Saunders et al, 2013). From this standpoint, reality is not treated as fixed or external, but as something that is continuously produced and negotiated through social processes.

In the context of this study, this means attending to how CSOs and policymakers interpret and communicate the role of civil society in development aid, not what civil society objectively is, but how different actors make sense of it through discourse. (Saunders et al, 2013).

This approach is particularly suitable in a context of institutional change, where meanings are actively contested. (Saunders et al, 2013), allowing the study to capture how actors respond to the Sida reform by constructing, justifying and challenging different understanding of civil society's role. (Schmidt, 2008).

4.2 Research Design

4.2.1 Qualitative Research Design

A qualitative research design follows logically from the interpretivist foundation of this study (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The research question is concerned with how meaning is produced and communicated, which requires a method sensitive to language, framing and context (Van Maanen, 1979).

Given that this study examines how the Swedish government and Swedish CSOs discursively construct the role of civil society in development aid, qualitative research design is the most appropriate approach (Van Maanen, 1979). The research question is inherently concerned with language, meaning and framing, which calls for a method capable of capturing how different actors articulate and justify particular positions in the context of the 2024 Sida reform. A quantitative approach would not be suitable here, as reducing textual and discursive material

to measurable variables would obscure precisely the kind of meaning-making that this study seeks to understand (Morgan & Smircich, 1980). Qualitative analysis of policy documents and CSO materials allows for tracing of how civil society's role is constructed across different institutional contexts, making it the most fitting methodological choice for addressing the research question.

4.2.2 Discourse Analysis

Drawing on Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) discourse theory, language does not simply reflect reality but actively constructs it, shaping identities, relationships and systems of meaning (Saunders et al., 2023). Meanings are never fixed or neutral, but continuously contested through political and social processes, meaning that what counts as legitimate or natural within a given context is always the outcome of discursive struggle rather than objective fact.

In this study, governmental and CSO documents are analysed as discursive texts through which actors construct competing understandings of civil society, its responsibilities, and its role within the reform process. The analysis attends to recurring concepts, representations and narratives in order to identify how these constructions reflect broader political assumptions and power relations.

4.3 Data Collection

4.3.1 Sample Selection

The empirical material consists of publicly available documents produced by two actor groups: the Swedish government and the 17 civil society organisations (CSOs) that held strategic partner agreements with Sida prior to the 2024 reform. In total, the study includes 35 documents (Appendix).

The governmental material consists of the government policy document *Bistånd för en ny era*, the main source through which the reform is constructed and justified. The CSO material includes debate articles, open letters and statements from the 17 organisations, as well as CONCORD Sverige, an umbrella organisation, reflecting how actors publicly respond to and contest the reform.

The material is limited to the period between March 2024, when Sida communicated the termination of strategic partnerships, and December 2024, when the agreements formally ended, capturing the phase of active institutional disruption (Sida, 2024).

4.3.2 Purposive Sampling: Rationale and Limitations

Purposive sampling was applied to ensure that the selected documents are directly relevant to the research question and contain content related to the role of civil society. The study therefore included documents that explicitly respond to the reform while excluding documents produced for unrelated purposes.

This sampling strategy also entails certain limitations. First, by focusing exclusively on publicly available documents, the study captures how organisations choose to present themselves in public rather than their internal deliberations or private beliefs. Public communication is inherently strategic, meaning that the analysis reflects how actors construct and communicate their positions rather than their underlying intentions (Hardy et al, 2000). This is not considered a weakness, as the study is explicitly concerned with discourse and public meaning-making.

Further, the uneven distribution of documents across organisations means that some actors are more visible in the material than others. Organisations that did not respond publicly, or only participated in joint statements, are less represented. The findings should therefore be interpreted as reflecting broader sectoral patterns rather than the position of any single organisation.

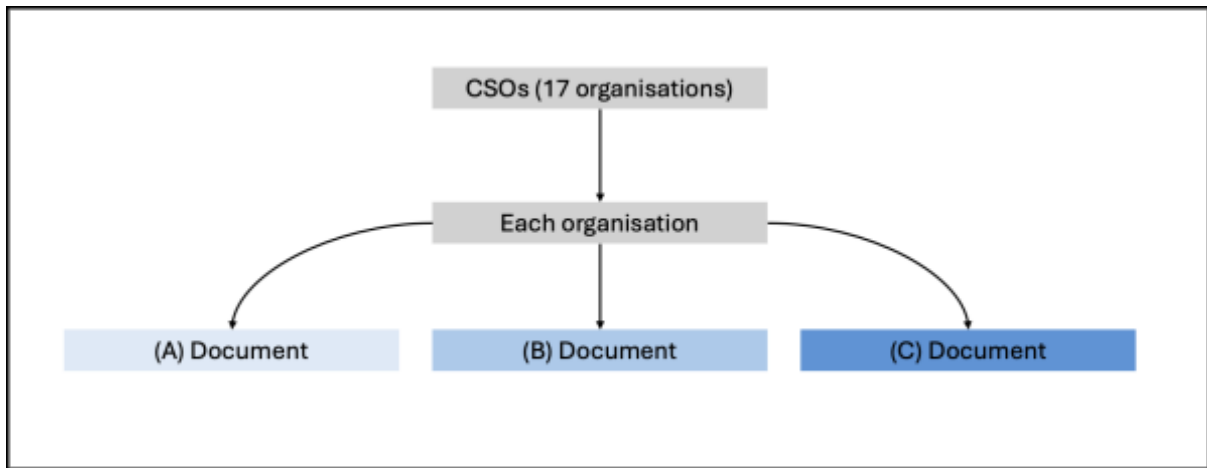


Figure 4.1 Illustration of collected CSO data (*Prander & Guillet de Monthoux, 2026*)

4.4 Document Analysis

Following the collection of empirical material, the documents were analysed using a structured qualitative approach, combining a theoretically informed coding structure with openness to patterns emerging from the data (Saunders et al., 2023).

The analysis began with data familiarisation through repeated readings of all documents. Guided by the theoretical framework, initial analytical categories were developed based on DI (Schmidt, 2008) and Suchman's (1995) theory of legitimacy, while remaining open to recurring patterns in the empirical material.

Through this iterative process, a set of empirical themes was identified and used to structure the findings presented in Section 5. Within each theme, the analysis focused on how actors frame the role of civil society, including how responsibilities are assigned, relationships defined and positions justified. Throughout the process, the authors engaged in continuous reflection to ensure consistency and minimise bias.

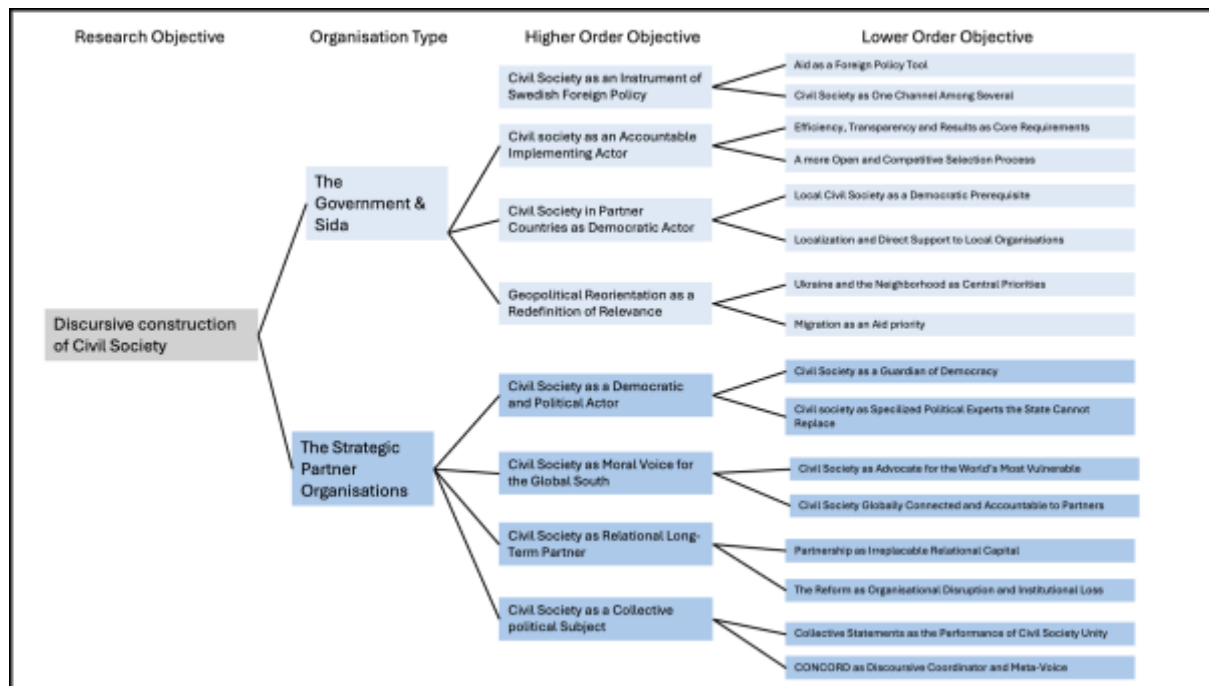


Figure 4.2 Overview of Empirical Findings (*Prander & Guillet de Monthoux, 2026*)

4.5 Use of AI

Artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used in a limited and supportive way throughout this study. Tools such as ChatGPT and Claude were foremost employed to assist with language refinement, including improving clarity, structure and grammar in written sections. AI was not used to generate empirical material, conduct analysis or draw conclusions. All analytical interpretations, theoretical applications and final arguments are the authors' own. The use of AI was thus restricted to supporting the writing process, while ensuring that all academic content remained independently developed and critically assessed by the authors.

5. Empirics

In this section we present the empirical data, derived from our previously mentioned research method, to answer the question:

How do the Swedish government and Swedish CSOs discursively construct the role of civil society in development aid in the context of the 2024 Sida reform?

5.1 The Government and Sida: Constructing Civil Society through Reform

In *Bistånd för en ny era* (Regeringen, 2023), the Swedish government presents a comprehensive reform agenda for Swedish development cooperation. The document outlines a fundamental reorientation of Swedish aid and articulates a vision of the role that CSOs should play within it.

5.1.1 Civil Society as an Instrument of Swedish Foreign Policy

5.1.1.1 Aid as a Foreign Policy Tool

The government consistently frames Swedish development cooperation as a strategic foreign policy instrument rather than an expression of solidarity. *Bistånd för en ny era* states that development cooperation is:

“one of the most important foreign policy tools for advancing and safeguarding Swedish interests, as well as addressing the challenges that we and the world face” - **Regeringen** (2023, p. 7)

CSOs are positioned within this framework as one of several channels through which Swedish priorities are to be advanced. In contexts where partner country governments lack democratic reform willingness, the document argues that cooperation should proceed:

“primarily through the actors, including those in civil society, that contribute to Sweden’s development cooperation policy agenda” - **Regeringen** (2023, p. 7)

Civil society is thus framed as an alternative implementing channel for achieving Swedish political objectives rather than as an independent actor with its own mandate.

5.1.1.2 Civil Society as One Channel Among Several

Bistånd för en ny era presents CSOs as one actor among several in Swedish development cooperation, alongside multilateral organizations and government agencies. The document states that Swedish development cooperation is carried out:

“in partnership with various actors such as governments, EU institutions, different UN bodies, international financial institutions, and civil society organizations”- Regeringen (2023, p. 30)

While the document announces that the share of aid channeled via civil society will increase, this commitment is explicitly conditional. Support to civil society actors will be increased only:

“in contexts where development aid activities are implemented effectively and contribute to the government’s priorities”- Regeringen (2023, p. 35)

The increase in civil society funding is thus tied directly to alignment with government priorities rather than to the independent value of civil society activity.

5.1.2 Civil Society as an Accountable Implementing Actor

5.1.2.1 Efficiency, Transparency and Results as Core Requirements

Throughout *Bistånd för en ny era*, the government argues that Swedish aid, including aid channeled via civil society, must be governed by the principles of efficiency, transparency and results. The document states that:

“quality and clearer reporting of results are therefore central”- Regeringen (2023, p. 7)

and that aid effectiveness is both:

“a matter of solidarity toward the recipients and a matter of legitimacy toward Swedish taxpayers as financiers”- Regeringen (2023, p. 7)

This framework is applied directly to civil society, where the document states that financial support channeled via civil society:

“should, like all other development aid, be transparent, results-oriented, and effective”- Regeringen (2023, p. 34)

The government further argues that organizations receiving Swedish support must report how resources are distributed between programmatic activities and administrative costs in both Sweden and partner countries.

5.1.2.2 A More Open and Competitive Selection Process

Bistånd för en ny era argues for a fundamental change to how civil society partners are selected. The document instructs Sida to:

“to explore the conditions for a more open and inclusive application process” - Regeringen (2023, p. 27)

This signals a deliberate move away from the previous model of long-term strategic partnerships with a fixed group of organizations, toward a more open and competitive funding process. The document further argues that both the granting and rejection of applications should:

“should always be accompanied by a clear justification” - Regeringen (2023, p. 35)

The government also instructs Sida to ensure that CSOs receiving Swedish aid report:

“how much resources are allocated to operations versus administrative costs in Sweden and in the partner country”- Regeringen (2023, p. 36)

These requirements frame CSOs as actors subject to the same performance management and accountability logic as any other implementing partner.

5.1.3 Civil Society in Partner Countries as Democratic Actor

5.1.3.1 Local Civil Society as a Democratic Prerequisite

While reframing Swedish CSOs as accountable implementing actors, *Bistånd för en ny era* simultaneously presents civil society in partner countries in strongly democratic terms. The document states that:

“a vibrant, pluralistic and independent civil society, free and independent media, and a free and dynamic cultural life are prerequisites for a democratic society”- **Regeringen** (2023, p. 17)

The government commits to increasing support to human rights defenders, democracy movements, and local organizations working for democratic accountability, arguing that Sweden should:

“to further contribute to a strong civil society and support organizations, democratic movements, actors and networks that stand up for human rights and fundamental freedoms”- **Regeringen** (2023, p. 17)

5.1.3.2 Localization and Direct Support to Local Organizations

The new aid policy states Swedish aid should reach local organizations directly and that support should be given:

“with the aim of promoting strong local ownership and influence in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity”- **Regeringen** (2023, p. 34)

The document further states that Swedish aid should:

“to strengthen local actors’ institutional capacity and encourage them to diversify their funding” - **Regeringen** (2023, p. 34)

This emphasis on direct support to local organizations implicitly questions the value of the intermediary role that Swedish CSOs have historically played in channeling Swedish aid to local partners.

5.1.4 Geopolitical Reorientation as a Redefinition of Relevance

5.1.4.1 Ukraine and the Neighborhood as Central Priorities

Bistånd för en ny era announces a significant geographic reorientation of Swedish aid toward Ukraine and Sweden's immediate neighborhood. The document describes Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine as:

“a paradigm shift”- **Regeringen** (2023, p. 4)

that fundamentally alters the conditions for Swedish foreign and aid policy, stating that:

“it is crucial at this time to support Ukraine and defend the rules-based international order”
- **Regeringen** (2023, p. 4)

The government commits to continuing extensive support to Ukraine "as long as it is needed" (Regeringen, 2023, p. 10), establishing Ukraine and Sweden's neighborhood as the geographic core of the reformed aid agenda.

5.1.4.2 Migration as an Aid Priority

The new reform introduces migration management as a core thematic priority for Swedish aid, arguing that aid should function as a tool:

“to counter irregular migration, increase returns, and contribute to effective efforts for voluntary return” - **Regeringen** (2023, p. 4)

The document further argues that development cooperation should be used to strengthen transit countries' capacity to manage migration flows and that parts of development aid may be conditioned on recipient countries cooperating with Sweden on migration returns (Regeringen, 2023, p. 22). This thematic expansion effectively redefines the scope within which CSOs are expected to operate and contribute.

5.2 The Strategic Partner Organisations: Constructing Civil Society in Resistance

5.2.1 Civil Society as a Democratic and Political Actor

5.2.1.1 Civil Society as a Guardian of Democracy

Multiple SPOs construct civil society as inherently democratic actors, whose independence from the state is central to its role in society.

“Without a vibrant civil society, democracy falls silent.” - ForumCiv (A)

“At a time when we are already experiencing democratic backsliding in the world, it is alarming that the government wants to push through a complete reorganization of international development work, while at the same time threatening democratic dialogue in Sweden.” - Afrikagrupperna (A)

The reform is framed not as a technical or administrative change, but as a broader threat to democratic structures.

“Why does the government want to risk reinforcing the ongoing backlash against democracy, gender equality, and human rights?” - Kvinna till Kvinna (A)

By connecting the reform to global democratic backsliding, SPOs position the Swedish government as complicit in a trend it has officially committed to opposing, a rhetorically powerful move that shifts the debate from funding allocation to democratic principle.

5.2.1.2 Civil Society as Specialized Political Experts the State Cannot Replace

Several organisations emphasize that civil society actors possess specialised knowledge, networks and operational capacity that the state cannot replicate.

“Sida does not have the capacity required to support the kind of often small, grassroots-based organizations that currently receive funding and capacity development through partnerships with Swedish civil society.” - Olof Palme International Center (B)

“The 17 organizations that currently channel development aid can, for example, carry out joint advocacy work with partner organizations, help strengthen their capacity, and reach a diversity of people. If Sida were to take over this work, the conditions for achieving the goals would also be affected, according to the agency’s own analysis.” - Rädda Barnen (B)

These statements highlight the role of civil society as an intermediary actor with unique access and competence.

“Our ongoing cooperation projects are also built on knowledge and trust and cannot be implemented as one-off interventions by just any development actor at any given time.” - Union to Union (A)

They argue that this expertise and specialisation cannot easily be replicated by the state. CSOs are thus constructed as indispensable intermediaries, whose role extends beyond implementation to enabling effective engagement with local actors. Without these organisations, the state’s ability to achieve its development objectives is portrayed as significantly constrained.

5.2.2 Civil Society as Moral Voice for the Global South

5.2.2.1 Civil Society as Advocate for the World’s Most Vulnerable

Several organisations frame civil society as representing and advocating for vulnerable populations globally.

“If Sida were to terminate all agreements with civil society, it would mean that hundreds of trade unions around the world would abruptly lose not only their funding, but also the network that has provided them with protection, knowledge, and the courage to claim their rights.” - Union to Union (B)

“In addition to withdrawing from some of the world’s most vulnerable and conflict-affected countries, the government has also reduced aid for peacebuilding efforts.” - Act Svenska Kyrkan (B)

“Three billion kronor that were meant to go toward combating poverty are instead being used to finance the Tidöpartiernas ’ migration policy.”- We Effect (B)

These statements position civil society as a moral actor representing and speaking on behalf of vulnerable populations. By emphasising the consequences of the reform for these groups, organisations frame civil society not only as an implementing actor, but as a voice for those directly affected by development aid.

5.2.2.2 Civil Society as Globally Connected and Accountable to Partners

Organisations also emphasize their long-term relationship with international partners and responsibilities toward them.

“Terminating contracts, despite the fact that these organizations have not mismanaged anything or done anything wrong, is a severe blow to the trust that has been built between Save the Children and courageous organizations that often operate under difficult conditions in Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America.”- Rädda Barnen (B)

“Sweden has abandoned its role as a global leader in international development cooperation, and aid funds are being used for purposes other than the goal of reducing poverty and oppression.” - Svenska Missionsrådet & Diakonia (B)

“This means that both we and our partner organizations will need to spend the coming months winding down ongoing operations, handling administrative tasks and writing new applications instead of working to ensure food security and economic development.”- We Effect (A)

These accounts highlight civil society as embedded in global networks of responsibility and cooperation, where long-term partnerships extend beyond funding relationships to include

trust, mutual commitments and shared object. The termination of these relationships are disrupting and creates consequences not only for the ongoing activities but also for the trust between the organisations and their partners.

“The announcement risks creating uncertainty and concern about whether they will continue to receive support under existing agreements, or whether these agreements will also be terminated.” - Naturskyddsföreningen (A)

5.2.3 Civil Society as Relational and Long-Term Partner

5.2.3.1 Partnership as Irreplaceable Relational Capital

Several organisations describe development cooperation as based on long-term relationships, trust and shared responsibility.

“Development cooperation based on this model relies on long-term relationships founded on shared values and entails shared responsibility in the implementation of activities.”- Act Svenska Kyrkan (C)

“Our strength as Diakonia is that we always work together with local organizations. We know that long-term development aid builds resilience and reduces the need for, and the cost of, emergency assistance.” - Diakonia (A)

“Our ongoing cooperation projects are built on knowledge and trust and cannot be implemented as one-off interventions by just any development actor whenever it suits them.”- Union to Union (A)

These statements frame partnerships as relational assets accumulated over time, rather than as short-term or transactional arrangements. Trust, shared values and continuous engagement are presented as central to effective development cooperation. In this context, the reform is described as putting these relationships at risk.

5.2.3.2 The Reform as Organisational Disruption and Institutional Loss

The reform is also described in terms of uncertainty and organisational disruption.

“Earlier this week, the management of the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation informed all staff that it will be very difficult to set a budget for 2025 based on a vague funding cap of 70 million SEK. With this new announcement, it becomes even more uncertain how extensive the organization’s development aid work will be once the current agreement expires.”-

Naturskyddsföreningen (B)

“The announcement from Sida entails significant uncertainty.”- Act Svenska kyrkan (C)

These accounts highlight the loss of stability and predictability within the aid system. This reinforces a view of civil society where effectiveness is closely tied to continuity and long-term engagement, rather than short-term project implementation.

“The organizations argue that the Swedish government is abandoning the principle of meaningful and inclusive consultation, as agreements with 1,750 civil society organizations in 90 countries are now being rapidly terminated without serious consultation or dialogue.”-

Diakonia (B)

5.2.4 Civil Society as a Collective Political Subject

5.2.4.1 Collective Statements as the Performance of Civil Society Unity

Several organisations articulate their critique of the reform through joint statements, presenting civil society as a unified political actor rather than a collection of individual organisations.

“The ‘transaction layers’ in civil society partnerships that the government describes as inherently negative are, in fact, prerequisites for achieving results: exchange of experience, capacity support, dialogue, and advocacy.” - Joint (D)

A number of large-scale collective statements further reinforce this shared position:

“Three billion kronor that was meant to go toward combating poverty...” - Joint (A)

“You can do better, the government.” - Joint (C)

“It can hardly be about the money for the government.” - Joint (B)

These statements construct civil society as a collective actor with a shared voice and common interests. When the organisations are speaking jointly, they strengthen the legitimacy of their critique and present the reform as affecting the sector as a whole rather than individual organisations.

5.2.4.2 CONCORD as Discursive Coordinator and Meta-Voice

CONCORD Sverige functions as an umbrella organisation, articulating the reform at a system level.

“Several organizations are in the middle of multi-year agreements and are now forced to inform local partners that planned activities may not be able to continue. This is a waste of the taxpayer money that has been invested in developing the current plans.” - CONCORD (A)

Through this framing, CONCORD positions the reform as affecting civil society broadly, extending beyond individual organisations to the wider system of development cooperation.

By coordinating and aggregating the responses of multiple organisations, CONCORD acts as a meta-voice, reinforcing the perception of civil society as a unified actor and amplifying concerns about systemic disruption.

6. Analysis

The analysis draws on Schmidt's DI and Suchman's theory of Organizational Legitimacy to interpret the empirical findings. It is structured around four thematic dimensions that cut across both actors: purpose, accountability, intermediary value, and temporality. These dimensions emerged as recurring themes throughout the empirical material and directly address the study's research question.

6.1 Purpose

The analysed documents reveal a discursive struggle over how civil society should be understood and what role it should play within Swedish development cooperation. Although actors repeatedly invoke the concept of "civil society," they construct its meaning in fundamentally different ways. The conflict therefore concerns not only policy preferences, but also the broader interpretation of civil society's purpose.

The government constructs civil society primarily through instrumental and managerial language. Development cooperation is described as "one of the most important foreign policy tools" (Regeringen, 2023, p. 7), positioning CSOs as actors expected to contribute to broader state-defined objectives. Through this framing, civil society is articulated less as an autonomous democratic sphere and more as a functional component within Sweden's foreign policy strategy. Schmidt's (2008) theory is useful here, particularly her distinction between cognitive and normative ideas. The government discourse is dominated by cognitive ideas that emphasise efficiency, strategic coordination, measurable outcomes, and policy implementation. Civil society becomes legitimised through its practical utility and capacity to deliver state priorities.

This construction reflects broader trends identified within development research, where CSOs have increasingly been incorporated into managerial governance frameworks that prioritise performance and policy delivery over independence and advocacy (Banks, Hulme, & Edwards, 2015). Discursively, the government does not explicitly reject democratic language, but gradually redefines it through administrative and strategic vocabulary. Terms associated

with participation and partnership are linked to effectiveness, alignment, and national interests, thereby narrowing the meaning of civil society to a primarily instrumental role.

CSOs construct a sharply contrasting discourse, framing civil society as constitutively democratic and independent from the state. “Without a vibrant civil society, democracy falls silent” positions civil society as a precondition for democratic life rather than a tool of governance. In Schmidt’s (2008) terms, this discourse is structured around normative ideas rooted in democratic values, participation, pluralism, and rights-based legitimacy. Civil society is therefore articulated as valuable in itself, independent of its usefulness to governmental objectives.

Suchman's (1995) theory complements Schmidt's framework by clarifying how competing discourses seek legitimacy through different mechanisms. The government relies primarily on pragmatic legitimacy, legitimising CSOs through their effectiveness and contribution to policy goals, while CSOs mobilise moral legitimacy by grounding their claims in democratic norms and civic autonomy. The conflict therefore reflects two competing understandings of legitimate civil society: one grounded in strategic utility and the other in democratic autonomy.

6.2 Accountability

The empirical material constructs accountability through competing discourses reflecting different understandings of legitimate civil society participation in development cooperation. In the government’s reform discourse, accountability is articulated through efficiency, transparency, and measurable results. CSOs are expected to demonstrate effectiveness through reporting, evaluation, and alignment with policy objectives, constructing accountability primarily as a matter of administrative responsibility and performance management.

Through Schmidt’s (2008) theory, this discourse can be understood as combining both cognitive and normative ideas. The cognitive dimension appears in the emphasis on efficiency, coordination, and measurable outcomes as rational and necessary ways of governing development cooperation. Simultaneously, the discourse contains normative

assumptions about what constitutes appropriate behaviour for CSOs, namely adaptability, policy alignment, and demonstrable effectiveness. Accountability is therefore not presented as politically contested, but as a self-evident requirement of responsible governance. Suchman's (1995) concept of pragmatic legitimacy complements this analysis by illustrating how legitimacy is tied to organisational usefulness. Civil society organisations become legitimate when they can demonstrate effectiveness and contribute to state-defined objectives.

CSOs construct accountability differently by emphasising responsibility toward local communities, partner organisations, and democratic values rather than primarily toward donors and state evaluation systems. Their discourse frames accountability as relational and grounded in participation, solidarity, and long-term engagement, challenging the assumption that legitimacy can be fully measured through quantifiable indicators.

Here, Schmidt's (2008) framework helps reveal how CSOs mobilise alternative normative ideas centred on democratic participation and civic autonomy while also contesting the government's cognitive assumptions about what counts as effective or meaningful accountability. Suchman's (1995) concept of moral legitimacy complements this perspective by showing how CSOs justify their authority through claims about democratic representation and social responsibility rather than policy utility alone. The discursive conflict over accountability therefore reflects competing attempts to define both the meaning of legitimate governance and the legitimate role of civil society within development cooperation.

6.3 Intermediary value

The empirical material reveals a discursive conflict over whether Swedish CSOs are constructed as necessary intermediaries or as unnecessary "transaction layers" within development cooperation. The government's emphasis on direct support to local actors implicitly problematises the role of Swedish organisations in the funding chain. Through Schmidt's (2008) framework, this reflects a cognitive idea in which development cooperation is understood primarily as a question of improving efficiency and resource transfer. Direct funding is discursively constructed as a more rational and effective organisational model.

Suchman's (1995) concept of pragmatic legitimacy complements this analysis by showing how legitimacy becomes tied to usefulness and efficiency. Within this discourse, intermediary

organisations must justify their position through demonstrable added value rather than through their existence as civil society actors alone.

CSOs challenge this directly by reframing intermediary structures as prerequisites for effective development cooperation. A joint statement argue that the 'transaction layers' in civil society partnerships that the government describes as inherently negative are, in fact, prerequisites for achieving results: exchange of experience, capacity support, dialogue, and advocacy" (Joint D). Similarly, Act Svenska Kyrkan states that "development cooperation based on this model relies on long-term relationships founded on shared values and entails shared responsibility in the implementation of activities" (Act Svenska Kyrkan C). Through this discourse, intermediary work is constructed not as administrative distance, but as relational infrastructure built on trust, continuity, and cooperation.

Schmidt's (2008) framework highlights how CSOs contest the government's underlying assumptions about what makes development cooperation effective. Rather than understanding aid as a technical delivery mechanism, CSOs construct effectiveness through relationships, long-term engagement, and institutional knowledge. Suchman's (1995) concept further deepens this analysis by illustrating how CSOs present intermediary structures as necessary and taken-for-granted conditions for sustainable development cooperation rather than optional organisational layers.

6.4 Temporality

The government justifies its restructuring through the language of openness and fairness. By instructing Sida to develop "a more open and inclusive application process" (Regeringen, 2023, p. 27), it presents the end of stable long-term partnerships as a move toward a fairer and more competitive system. The requirement that funding decisions "should always be accompanied by a clear justification" (Regeringen, 2023, p. 35) replaces relational trust with procedural transparency as the central value. In Schmidt's (2008) terms, this is coordinative discourse working through normalisation: the reform is presented not as a political choice but as a rational correction of a previously closed and privileged system. From Suchman's (1995) perspective, this constructs pragmatic legitimacy as the governing standard, where organisations must continuously prove their worth through open competition rather than accumulated relationships.

What this language of openness conceals is the cost of discontinuity, and it is precisely this that CSO discourse works to make visible. We Effect describes how they "will need to spend the coming months winding down ongoing operations, handling administrative tasks and writing new applications instead of working to ensure food security and economic development", exposing the gap between procedural logic and development reality. The government's own accountability standard is then turned against it, with the argument that winding down mid-agreement represents "a waste of the taxpayer money that has been invested in developing the current plans". Against this, CSOs construct long-term partnership as a development necessity rather than institutional comfort, pointing to the accumulated relationships that make effective cooperation possible. Diakonia expresses that "Long-term development aid builds resilience and reduces the need for, and the cost of, emergency assistance", while Act Svenska Kyrkan describes cooperation as "based on long-term relationships founded on shared values and entailing shared responsibility". Frequent funding disruptions undermine precisely this relational continuity (Arvidson and Linde, 2021), and through Suchman (1995), CSOs claim both moral and cognitive legitimacy, framing long-term relationships not as a preference but as a precondition for effective development cooperation that the government's temporal logic fundamentally misunderstands.

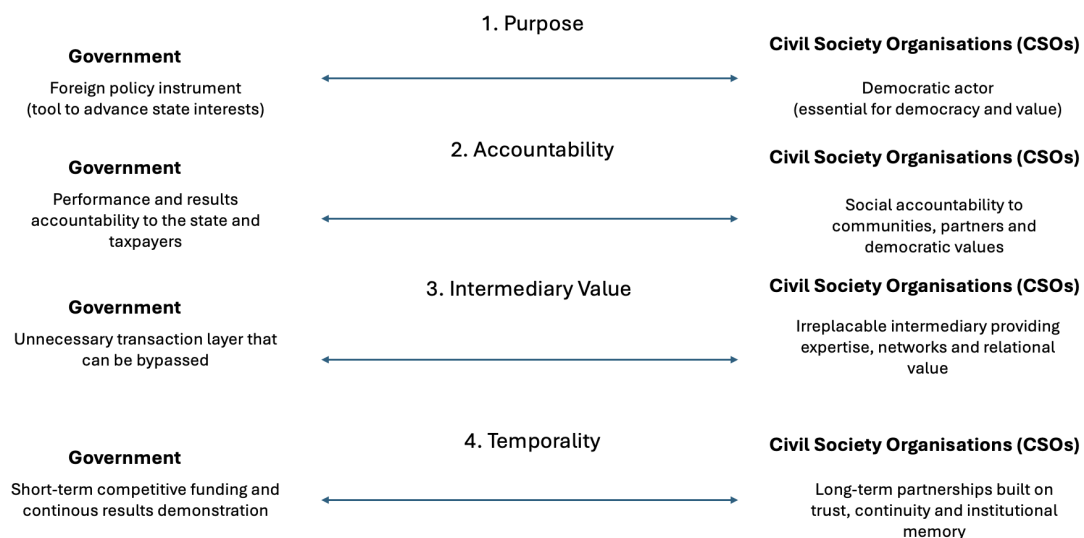


Figure 6.1 Simplified Comparison of Discourse Analysis (*Prander & Guillet de Monthoux, 2026*)

7. Discussion and Conclusion

7.1 Answer to Research Question

This study aimed to answer the following research question:

How do the Swedish government and Swedish CSOs discursively construct the role of civil society in development aid in the context of the 2024 Sida reform?

The findings show that the Swedish government and Swedish CSOs construct fundamentally different understandings of what civil society is, what role it should play in development cooperation, and what constitutes legitimate and effective aid.

7.1.1 The Government's Discursive Construction of Civil Society

The empirics clearly show that the Swedish government constructs civil society primarily as an accountable, efficient and results-oriented implementing actor. In *Bistånd för en ny era* (Regeringen, 2023), aid is framed as a strategic foreign policy instrument connected to Swedish interests, migration management and measurable outcomes. Within this discourse, CSOs are legitimate insofar as they contribute effectively to state-defined objectives. The government's construction works through gradual semantic substitution, replacing democratic vocabulary with managerial vocabulary while maintaining the appearance of continuity. Framing development cooperation as "one of the most important foreign policy tools" (Regeringen, 2023, p. 7) quietly repositions civil society from an independent sphere into an instrument of state strategy

This reflects Schmidt's (2008) concept of cognitive ideas, where institutional arrangements are justified through claims about effectiveness and necessity. The government's emphasis on competition, transparency and measurable results also aligns with broader managerial trends identified in civil society literature, where NGOs increasingly operate as professionalised implementing actors within donor-governed systems (Banks, Hulme and Edwards, 2015). Through Suchman's (1995) framework, this construction primarily relies on pragmatic legitimacy.

7.1.2 The CSO's Construction of Civil Society

In contrast, Swedish CSOs construct civil society as an independent democratic actor grounded in solidarity, long-term relationships and responsibility toward local partners and vulnerable populations. Rather than defining legitimacy through efficiency or state utility, CSOs frame civil society as essential for democracy and effective development cooperation. This reflects Schmidt's (2008, p. 306) concept of normative ideas, where legitimacy is rooted in democratic values rather than technical performance.

CSOs emphasise trust, continuity and relational partnerships as central to development work, positioning aid as a long-term relational practice rather than a transactional delivery mechanism. This aligns with Banks, Hulme and Edwards (2015, p. 709) and Appe (2017, p. 1907), who argue that intermediary organisations derive legitimacy from long-term local relationships and relational infrastructure. Through Suchman's (1995, p. 579) framework, CSOs primarily rely on moral legitimacy by presenting themselves as defenders of democracy, solidarity and human rights.

7.1.3 Understanding the Diverging Constructions

Taken together, the two discourses illustrate a broader transformation in how civil society is understood within Swedish development cooperation. Through Schmidt's (2008) theoretical lens, this can be understood as a moment of institutional renegotiation, where previously shared assumptions about the role of civil society are being challenged and redefined. The reform therefore reflects a shift from a partnership-based understanding of civil society toward a more managerial and performance-oriented model of governance.

The findings further suggest that the disagreement is not simply about funding levels, but about what civil society fundamentally is. While the government constructs CSOs as implementing actors whose legitimacy depends on efficiency and measurable outcomes, CSOs construct themselves as independent democratic actors whose legitimacy rests on solidarity, trust and long-term relationships. Through Suchman's (1995) framework, this illustrates a clash between pragmatic and moral legitimacy, revealing competing understandings of what constitutes legitimate and effective development cooperation.

7.2 Contributions

The findings nuance the resource dependence framework of Arvidson and Linde (2021) and Neumayr, Schneider and Meyer (2013) by suggesting that the relationship between funding dependency and advocacy constraint is conditioned by the nature of disruption: abrupt institutional termination appears to produce open discursive resistance where gradual funding pressure produces silence. The study further supports Banks, Hulme and Edwards' (2015) argument regarding the managerial repositioning of NGOs, while demonstrating that this process is actively contested through institutionalized normative frameworks, suggesting the trajectory they identify is neither linear nor inevitable. In extending the aid reform literature to a donor-country context (Appel, 2017; Arhin, Kumi and Adam, 2018), the findings indicate that structural reorganization produces qualitatively different organizational and discursive responses than gradual funding decline, a distinction the existing literature has not yet theorized. Finally, the combination of Schmidt (2008) and Suchman (1995) demonstrates that legitimacy conflicts during institutional reform are more analytically tractable when examined at both the macro-ideational and organizational level simultaneously.

7.3 Limitations to the Study

The study carries several limitations worth acknowledging. Since the analysis is based exclusively on publicly available documents, it captures how the Swedish government and CSOs choose to present their positions in public, rather than their internal deliberations or strategic intentions. While this is consistent with the study's focus on discourse, it means that the findings reflect communicated positions rather than underlying motivations.

The focus on the Swedish government and the 17 previously partnerships CSOs further shapes the scope of the study. While this ensures analytical coherence, it limits the extent to which the findings can be transferred to other contexts.

Further, the empirical material is unevenly distributed across organisations. Some actors produced multiple public statements, while others contributed only a limited number or participated primarily through joint statements. As a result, certain voices are more prominent in the analysis than others.

Finally, the study is limited to a specific time period marked by institutional disruption. While this allows for a focused analysis of discursive contestation, it does not capture how these

constructions may evolve over time or how they may influence long-term organisational practices and outcomes.

7.4 Recommendations for Future Research

This study opens several directions for future research.

First, future studies could extend the analysis to include additional actors, such as partner organisations in aid receiving countries or policymakers involved in the implementation of the reform. This would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how the role of civil society is constructed across different levels of the aid system.

Second, further research could examine how the discursive constructions identified in this study translate into organisational practices and outcomes. While this study focuses on how civil society is described and justified, future work could explore how these discourses influence actual funding allocations, partnerships and development outcomes.

Third, longitudinal studies could analyse how these discourses evolve over time. As the Sida reform is implemented, it would be valuable to examine whether the identified tensions persist, intensify or are resolved, and how this affects the state-civil society relationship.

7.5 Conclusion

This study examined how the Swedish government and Swedish CSOs discursively construct the role of civil society in development aid in the context of the 2024 Sida reform. The findings show a clear divergence: while the government frames civil society as a results-oriented implementing actor, CSOs construct it as an independent democratic force grounded in solidarity and long-term engagement.

These competing constructions indicate that the reform is not only a policy change, but a process of institutional redefinition. Through discourse, the role of civil society is actively contested and renegotiated. The study therefore highlights how institutional change is shaped not only by material restructuring, but by struggles over meaning and legitimacy.

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Appendix

#	Organisation	Code	Document type	Title
1	CONCORD Sverige	CONCORD (A)	Statement/Article	“Sida terminates agreements with civil society organisations”
2	Act Svenska Kyrkan	Act Svenska kyrkan (A)	Debate Article	“Sveriges Bistånd ska finnas där det behövs “
3	Act Svenska Kyrkan	Act Svenska kyrkan (B)	Debate article	“Sverige sviker världens mest utsatta människor..”
4	Act Svenska Kyrkan	Act Svenska kyrkan (C)	Website statement	“Stora förändringar i Sidas stöd“
5	Kvinna till Kvinna	Kvinna till Kvinna (A)	Open letter	“Öppet brev: Varför vill regeringen riskera att förstärka den pågående backlashen för demokrati, jämställdhet och mänskliga rättigheter?”
6	We Effect	We Effect (A)	Website statement	“Sida bryter sina avtal med civilsamhället”
7	We Effect	We Effect (B)	Debate Article	“Biståndet betalar ny migrationspolitik”
8	ForumCiv	ForumCiv (A)	Article	“Biståndsform hotar- “Utan civilsamhälle tystnar demokratin””
9	ForumCiv	ForumCiv (B)	Statement	“Sida säger upp avtal med civilsamhället”
10	ForumCiv	ForumCiv (C)	Debate article	“Regeringens attack på biståndet ett lågvattenmärke”
11	ForumCiv	ForumCiv (D)	Joint article	“Ett agerande tväremot ambitionerna “
12	Naturskyddsföreningen	Naturskyddsföreningen (A)	Statement	“Sida säger upp avtal med Naturskyddsföreningen”
13	Naturskyddsföreningen	Naturskyddsföreningen (B)	Statement	“Stor osäkerhet kring naturskyddsföreningens biståndsverksamhet”
14	Naturskyddsföreningen	Naturskyddsföreningen (C)	Article	“Naturskyddsföreningen behöver omorganisera”
15	Olof Palme Int. Center	Olof Palme Int. Center (A)	Debate article	“Vill Tidöregeringen tysta oss genom att slopa fackligt bistånd”

16	Olof Palme Int. Center	Olof Palme Int. Center (B)	Debate article	“Varför till Tidöregeringen ta bort fackligt samarbete från biståndet”
17	Olof Palme Int. Center	Olof Palme Int. Center (C)	Article	“Rädda fackliga biståndet”
18	Afrikagrupperna	Afrikagrupperna (A)	Statement	“Afrikagrupperna protesterar när regeringen nedmonterar civilsamhället”
19	Afrikagrupperna	Afrikagrupperna (B)	Statement	“Uttalande Afrikagrupperna om nya CSO strategin”
20	Rädda Barnen	Rädda Barnen (A)	Press release	“Sida bör ompröva beslutet att säga upp biståndskontrakt”
21	Rädda Barnen	Rädda Barnen (B)	Article	“Sida säger upp avtal med strategiska partners”
22	Rädda Barnen	Rädda Barnen (C)	Annual Report	Annual report 2023
23	Union to Union	Union to Union (A)	Statement	“Sida måste ompröva beslutet att riva upp avtal om bistånd”
24	Union to Union	Union to Union (B)	Article	“Sida säger upp avtal om fackligt bistånd”
25	Svenska Missionsrådet	Svenska Missionsrådet (A)	Article	“Uppsagda avtal skakar kristna biståndsorganisationer- vad ligger bakom konflikten “
26	Svenska Missionsrådet	Svenska Missionsrådet (B)	Debate article	“Biståndsprojekt för miljoner hotade”
27	Diakonia	Diakonia (A)	Annual report	Årsberättelse
28	Diakonia	Diakonia (B)	Open letter	“Global oro för svenskt bistånd”
29	Diakonia	Diakonia (C)	Debate article	“Biståndet är under attack”
30	Diakonia	Diakonia (D)	Article	“Vad händer med biståndet”
31	Diakonia	Diakonia (E)	Debate article	“Sida måste redovisa sina kriterier”
32	Multi-org	Joint (A)	Debate article	“Replik-Biståndet betalar ny migrationspolitik”
33	Multi-org	Joint (B)	Debate article	“21-organisationer-Vad har regeringen emot oss som jobbar för fred”

34	Multi-org	Joint (C)	Debate article	“37-organisationer- Ni kan bättre regeringen “
35	Multi-org	Joint (D)	Debate article/ Insändare	“Organisationer - Biståndspolitiken präglas av brist på insyn och långsiktighet”