

# Solidarity in international development aid: examples from the Covid-19 pandemic

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Although it is a fundamental concept in global health and development, solidarity is surprisingly hard to capture. This essay first discusses characteristics of solidarity, including perceived and real tensions between self-interest and solidarity in international aid. In doing so, it draws upon illustrative examples from Sweden's aid history, as well as international vaccine solidarity during the Covid-19 pandemic. It then discusses solidarity within the context of current shifts in Swedish aid and the broader international aid system. Many traditional donors are cutting back on aid and shifting to defence spending, while the US has withdrawn from the World Health Organization (WHO) and has dismantled its aid infrastructure. Within this context, this essay explores the extent to which solidarity remains relevant as a motive for aid.

## Introduction

Formally, Swedish international development aid has long been grounded in solidarity. It features in the first government bill on development aid from 1962 which sets out solidarity as a motive for aid.<sup>1</sup> It has been reiterated in countless other official documents, including a 1977 review of Swedish development aid which shared “the view expressed on several occasions by the Government and Parliament that the demand for solidarity with the poor countries constitutes a sufficient motive for an extensive Swedish programme of development assistance.”<sup>2</sup> More recently, in 2021, then Prime Minister Stefan Löfven went so far as to tell the UN General Assembly in that “international solidarity is part of the Swedish DNA.”<sup>3</sup>

Although it is a fundamental concept in global health and development, solidarity is surprisingly hard to capture. This essay first discusses characteristics of solidarity within an aid context, including perceived and real tensions between self-interest and solidarity in international aid. In doing so, it draws upon illustrative examples from Sweden’s aid history, as well as international vaccine solidarity during the Covid-19 pandemic. It then discusses solidarity within the context of current shifts in Swedish aid and the broader international aid system. Specifically, the current government (2022-2026) has downplayed the altruistic and moral aspects of aid, instead focusing on aid that is explicitly in Sweden’s national interest. Moreover, as highlighted in this special issue, the international aid system is in crisis. Many traditional donors are cutting back on aid and shifting to defence spending, while the US has withdrawn from the WHO, cut aid to the vaccine alliance GAVI and has dismantled the US’s aid agency, USAID. Within this context, this essay explores the extent to which solidarity remains relevant as a motive for aid.

## What is solidarity?

While an absolute definition may be impossible, there are several aspects which characterise most uses of the term ‘solidarity,’ particularly in Swedish approaches to international development aid. It is relational: one expresses solidarity for another. It is not necessarily a natural attitude or position, but is created through

1. Angående Svenskt Utvecklingsbistånd. Prop. 100. 1962. <https://lagen.nu/prop/1962:100>

2. English version: Extracts from the Report of the Commission on Swedish International Development Co-operation, 1973-77. Presented to the Swedish Government on 21 April 1977. *Development Dialogue* 1977:1, s.104-115; Swedish version: *Sveriges samarbete med u-länderna. Betänkande av biståndspolitiska utredningen* (Statens Offentliga Utredningar No. SOU 1977:13). Utrikesdepartementet. <https://utvecklingsarkivet.se/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/SOU-1977-13-Sveriges-samarbete-med-ulanterna-full.pdf>

3. *Address by PM Stefan Löfven at the General Debate of the 76th Session of the United Nations General Assembly*, United Nations General Assembly 76th Session (2021). [https://gadebate.un.org/sites/default/files/gastatements/76/se\\_en.pdf](https://gadebate.un.org/sites/default/files/gastatements/76/se_en.pdf)

education, advocacy and social pressure and is associated with moral arguments for aid. It also requires some level of sacrifice on the part of the party which is expressing solidarity. Finally, as a motive for aid, solidarity is often contrasted with self-interest, but this is somewhat of a false dichotomy.

### *Solidarity as relational*

Solidarity is relational. One acts in a solidaristic manner towards another. Solidarity does not necessarily require an existing relationship, but a relationship is created through solidarity if one does not already exist. For instance, that Ethiopia was one of the first recipients of Swedish aid is in large part because of historical ties between Swedish missionaries and the country.<sup>4</sup> In other cases, as taken up in the next section, the solidarity relationship is created through advocacy work. Solidarity also fosters empathy, creating a feeling that both parties are “in it together” and, at a fundamental, human level, have similar needs, desires and wants.

This solidary relationship is entered into freely, with no formal coercion. However, guilt or social pressure can exert significant influence, pushing someone into acting in a solidaristic manner. For instance, ethnologist Britta Lundgren has described the vaccination campaign during the H1N1 pandemic in 2009 in which public health officials and politicians used language around solidarity to promote vaccination. Although vaccination was voluntary, many of the people she interviewed felt that it would have been socially unacceptable to refuse vaccination.<sup>5,6</sup> In international development, it is not uncommon for politicians to compare Sweden with Norway and other large donors – suggesting a sort of international peer pressure to be the better donor.<sup>7</sup>

### *Solidarity, morality and folkbildning*

Solidarity is not the same as morality, but is associated with morality. The moral argument for aid is that “we should do this because it is the right thing to do.” Yet, to some extent, knowing what the right thing to do is part of the relational aspect of solidarity. That is, international solidarity often requires a justification or explanation of why helping a certain group is important. In the Swedish tra-

4. Heppling, S. (1986). The very first years. In P. Frühling (Ed.), *Swedish development aid in perspective: Policies, Problems & Results since 1952*. (pp. 13–26). Almqvist & Wiksell International.

5. Lundgren, B. (2017). Health politics, Solidarity and Social Justice. An Ethnography of Enunciatory Communities during and after the H1N1 Pandemic in Sweden. *Ethnologia Europaea*, 47(2), 22–39.

6. Lundgren, B. (2016). Solidarity at the Needle Point—The Intersection of Compassion and Containment during the A(H1N1) Pandemic in Sweden 2009. *Sociology and Anthropology*, 4(12), 1108–1116. <https://doi.org/10.13189/sa.2016.041210>

7. For example, see: *Riksdagens Protokoll 2020/21:83 Onsdagen den 24 februari. (2021)*.

dition, we find examples from *folkbildning*, such as study circles, public lectures and the adult education sector (*folkhögskolor*).<sup>8</sup> Historically and contemporarily, these included seminars or lectures by prominent individuals who had worked overseas and returned home to promote the ideas of helping individuals in low and middle-income countries, or to raise awareness of key issues, such as tuberculosis or maternal mortality.

A related example was the Central Committee for Swedish Technical Assistance to Less Developed Areas, or CK, which was set up in 1952 as a sort of precursor to modern development aid agencies; it was largely comprised of civil society organisations with government funding. One of CK's key roles was to build public support for the idea of development cooperation. That is, though public awareness campaigns, they successfully fostered empathy between the Swedes and people thousands of kilometres away, thus "selling" the idea of solidarity with what was then known as the Third World.<sup>9,10</sup> In this way, CK and other organisations created a solidaristic relationship that did not previously exist.

### *Solidarity and self-interest*

Solidarity is often contrasted against self-interest. Gunnar Myrdal addressed this in his 1975 Nobel Speech which, in very broad strokes, covered the history of development aid.<sup>11</sup> He contrasted the United States' nationalistic motives for aid with those of Scandinavian countries, whose aid was based on "solidarity and compassion with the needy."<sup>12</sup> However, in practice, the relationship between solidarity and self-interest is often more complex. Global health expert Katerini Storeng and colleagues are critical of binary distinctions between solidarity and self-interest, using the term "strategic solidarity" to describe the way in which countries can "simultaneously engage in collaborative approaches to shared problems while also using these efforts to pursue other interests."<sup>13</sup>

For example, in 2001, a parliamentary committee released a report – A New Swedish Policy for Global Development (*En ny svensk politik för global utveckling*) – which described solidarity and "enlightened self-interest" as two separate

8. *Folkbildning* is a wider Nordic movement dating back to the 1800s, which focusses on providing continuing education and lifelong learning, to promote democracy, and social and community engagement.

9. Heppling (1986)

10. Berg, A., Lundberg, U., & Tydén, M. (2021). *En svindlande uppgift: Sverige och biståndet 1945-1975*. Ordfronts förlag.

11. Gunnar Myrdal was a highly influential economist who, along with his wife Alva, was one of the key architects of the Swedish welfare state.

12. Myrdal, G. (1975, March 17). *The Equality Issue in World Development*. Lecture to the memory of Alfred Nobel. <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/economic-sciences/1974/myrdal/lecture/>

13. Storeng, K. et al. Strategic solidarity: Scandinavian contributions to global vaccine equity during the Covid-19 pandemic. Working paper.

motives for aid.<sup>14</sup> A vulgar self-interest would be, for example, providing aid in order to gain access to military bases. By contrast, an enlightened self-interest recognises the mutual benefits of aid – for example, addressing issues with cross-border effects such as climate, biodiversity, infectious disease or conflict; the report specifically framed these in terms of global public goods. However, the authors did not create the idea of “enlightened self-interest.” Rather, they put a new label on the practices and orientations that had long characterised Swedish aid. For example, historically – and particularly before NATO membership in 2024 – Sweden’s security policy had been tied to its aid policy. As a non-aligned country, it needed for the rest of the world to stay out of conflict. Investment in low-income countries was also seen as a way to create markets for Swedish industry. Additionally, a minor critique from a Centre Party (*Centerpartiet*) politician at the time was that solidarity and enlightened self-interest were not actually two different motives because, “self-interest lies in the recognition that there is only one Earth.”<sup>15</sup> Regardless, the term “enlightened self-interest” never gained traction and was dropped in future aid strategies.<sup>16</sup>

### *Solidarity and sacrifice*

Third, *real* solidarity involves sacrifice for the other group, often in the pursuit of equity. It is about making choices that do not directly benefit us but that do benefit society or the community. A classic example is found in the welfare state: people without children pay taxes which support benefits such as parental leave or subsidised childcare. This eventually helps the person without children and wider society because the children of today go on to become essential workers. Within an aid context, international or global solidarity is often oriented around money: money is given or redistributed to low- and middle-income countries, ultimately in pursuit of poverty reduction and promoting international equity. Another example could be abstaining from purchasing products made in poor working conditions and/or by slave labour – in order to show solidarity with these groups.

In contrast, a more *performative* solidarity involves talking about solidarity because it bestows upon the speaker some measure of social capital – it looks good to give the appearance of being solidaristic; but performative solidarity involves making few or no sacrifices. Myrdal also raised this point in his Nobel Speech:

...I should note that even in those countries, that were more generous with aid, it was still on a marginal level, not implying much real sacrifice for their peoples.

14. Globkom, Kommittén om Sveriges politik för global utveckling. (2002). *En ny svensk politik för global utveckling* (Statens Offentliga Utredningar No. SOU 2001:96). Utrikesdepartementet.

15. *ibid*

16. Wohlgemuth, L. (2020). Varför ska vi fortsätta med bistånd år 2020? *Utvecklingsmagasinet (FUF)*. <https://fuf.se/magasin/varfor-ska-vi-fortsatta-med-bistand-ar-2020/>

He went on to critique high-income countries who were lukewarm towards calls for a New International Economic Order in the 1970s, suggesting that “they are not really prepared to give up [their] privileges.”<sup>17</sup> Amongst other things he suggested that rich countries (especially Americans) “should be challenged to bring down their lavish food consumption,” particularly meat, in order to free up grain for food aid.<sup>18</sup> Ultimately, by Myrdal’s reasoning, real solidarity involves rich countries collectively making sacrifices for the betterment of the world. Or, as Prime Minister Olof Palme bluntly asked in a 1974 speech in Piteå: “Is the world’s rich minority prepared to make sacrifices, to give up any of its privileges and positions of power?”<sup>19</sup>

As taken up in the next section, vaccine diplomacy during the Covid-19 pandemic offers a further example for discussing sacrifice and solidarity.

## Solidarity, sacrifice and Covid-19

### *Covax and solidarity*

In 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) launched the Access to Covid-19 Tools Accelerator for the development and equitable distribution of Covid-19 diagnostics, medicines and vaccines. Under this umbrella, the vaccine alliance Gavi coordinated the Covax Facility for vaccine procurement and distribution (henceforth referred to Covax). Simply, Covax would negotiate deals with pharmaceutical companies to get the best deals for all countries and would ensure fairness in vaccine distribution.<sup>7</sup>

Through Covax, high- and upper-middle income countries could purchase vaccines, while low- and lower-middle-income countries would have access to highly subsidised or free vaccines. Additionally, as part of this, all countries would initially receive enough doses to cover 20% of their population, which was later raised to 50% for high- and upper-middle-income countries in an attempt to make it more politically acceptable.<sup>20,21</sup> In the end, high-income countries largely bypassed Covax, instead signing either direct deals with pharmaceutical companies or

17. The New International Economic Order was a series of global economic proposals in the 1970s to create more fair relations between ‘developing’ and ‘developed’ countries in the context of postcolonialism.

18. Myrdal (1975)

19. English version: Palme, O. (1974). *World peace, super powers and national independence*. Social Democratic Party of Sweden. [https://olofpalme.arbark.se/wp-content/dokument/740804b\\_broderskaps\\_kongress\\_pitea.pdf](https://olofpalme.arbark.se/wp-content/dokument/740804b_broderskaps_kongress_pitea.pdf); Swedish version: Palme, O. (1974). *Anförande vid Broderskaps kongress i Piteå* [Anförande]. <https://olofpalme.arbark.se/1974/08/04/anforande-vid-broderskaps-kongress-i-pitea/>

20. Usher, A. D. (2021). A beautiful idea: How COVAX has fallen short. *The Lancet*, 397(10292), 2322–2325. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(21\)01367-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(21)01367-2)

21. Yamey, G., Garcia, P., Hassan, F., Mao, W., McDade, K. K., Pai, M., Saha, S., Schellekens, P., Taylor, A., & Udayakumar, K. (2022). It is not too late to achieve global covid-19 vaccine equity. *BMJ*, e070650. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj-2022-070650>

taking part in other multilateral initiatives, such as the EU's Joint Procurement Framework. While they used other mechanisms to procure vaccines for their own populations, many countries also donated to Covax. However, because high-income countries bought doses outside of Covax, it meant that there were not enough doses available for low- and lower-middle income countries.

Sweden was one of the most generous donors to Covax, ultimately donating over 11 million vaccine doses by the end of 2022.<sup>22</sup> Even if the term was not used, the idea of “strategic solidarity” was used to justify this spending. In Parliament, politicians argued for contributing to Covax “out of solidarity and out of self-interest.”<sup>23</sup> The argument was that supporting vaccination in other countries would prevent the rise of new coronavirus variants. It was also in the best economic interest of the country: the pandemic affected trading which, in turn, affected Swedish companies.<sup>24</sup>

A further issue was that it was hard to make the scientific case for more equitable allocation of vaccines: While “no one is safe until everyone was safe,” was a guiding mantra, there was a lack of modelling or studies from previous pandemics to guide the best way to globally distribute vaccines. Essentially, the case needed to be made that “if we vaccinate X% of the global population, then we can avert X number of infections or deaths in Sweden.”<sup>25</sup> The evidence to make that argument simply did not exist, not least because this was the first pandemic caused by a coronavirus. One study, published in 2023, found that, globally, more deaths would have been averted if vaccines had been equitably shared.<sup>26</sup> However, a finding in the research group's pre-print, but not the final version was that, by sharing vaccines more equitably, some wealthy countries would have been worse off in terms of deaths.<sup>27</sup> The key here is to find that ideal allocation strategy between global solidarity and national interest – that is, how much are wealthy countries willing to sacrifice for the global good?

22. COVAX, ACT-Accelerator Hub (2022) – processed by Our World in Data. “COVID-19 doses shipped by COVAX” [dataset]. COVAX, ACT-Accelerator Hub, “Vaccine dose donations to COVAX” [original data].

23. *Riksdagens Protokoll 2020/21:108 Torsdagen den 15 april.* (2021).

24. *ibid*

25. Irwin, R. (2026). *Global Health: Swedish perspectives on key debates, politics and practice*. Nordic Academic Press.

26. Gozzi, N., Chinazzi, M., Dean, N. E., Longini Jr, I. M., Halloran, M. E., Perra, N., & Vespignani, A. (2023). Estimating the impact of COVID-19 vaccine inequities: A modeling study. *Nature Communications*, 14(1), 3272. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-023-39098-w>

27. Chinazzi, M., Davis, J.T., Dean, N.E., et al. (2020) Estimating the effect of cooperative versus uncooperative strategies of COVID-19 vaccine allocation: a modeling study [Pre-print] <https://www.networkscienceinstitute.org/publications/estimating-the-effect-of-cooperative-versus-uncooperative-strategies-of-covid-19-vaccine-allocation-a-modeling-study>

Patent protections for vaccines also highlight tensions with solidarity. The Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) is an international agreement under the auspices of the World Trade Organization (WTO) which covers many aspects of patent law. There are flexibilities in the agreement which allow countries to legally circumvent patents during public health emergencies, but these can be difficult to access in practice. In 2020 India and South Africa proposed that Covid-19 vaccines should be exempt from TRIPS. That is, all proprietary information about vaccine production should be made available and freely licensed, along with that for therapeutics and diagnostics. The EU, including Sweden, the US, UK and other wealthy countries opposed this TRIPS waiver. Ultimately it was granted in 2022, but in a much watered-down form and far too late in the pandemic to have a serious impact. Opponents to India and South Africa's proposal – including representatives of the Swedish government – cited the classic arguments that patents are important because they provide incentives for companies to invest in research and development; they also cited challenges beyond patent protection, such as production capacity and supply chain problems.<sup>28,29</sup>

Proponents of the waiver appealed to equity and international solidarity, again reiterating the idea that “no one is safe until everyone is safe.” The Left Party (*Vänsterpartiet*) also noted that much of the research for the Covid-19 vaccine development was publicly funded, arguing that pharmaceutical companies' profits were effectively the result of taxpayer spending.<sup>30,31</sup>

However, opponents of the TRIPS waiver also invoked solidarity by deflecting attention from the waiver to Sweden's international contributions, as a representative of the Social Democrats noted in a response to the Left Party's questioning in parliament:

Sweden is currently making a strong contribution to increasing the production and distribution of vaccines and ensuring that they are distributed globally according to need. Both in relation to the EU's joint procurement and within Covax, Sweden is actively pushing for vaccines to be produced and sold at the lowest possible price. It is a matter of international solidarity.<sup>32</sup>

28. Heimersson, A. (2021, January 28). Ministern: Därför säger Sverige nej till billigare vaccin. Dagens Arena. <https://www.dagensarena.se/innehall/ministen-darfor-sager-sverige-nej-till-billigare-vaccin/>

29. Blanck, A. (2022, June 17). WTO-beslut äventyrar medicinsk forskning. Lif, De Forskande Läkemedelsföretagen. <https://www.lif.se/nyheter/2022/6/wto-beslut-aventyrar-medicinsk-forskning/>

30. Svenneling, H. (2021). Mer vaccin måste tillverkas – lyft på patentet. Utvecklingsmagasinet (FUF). <https://fuf.se/en/magasin/mer-vaccin-maste-tillverkas-lyft-pa-patentet/>

31. Riksdagens protokoll 2021/22:52. Torsdagen den 13 januari. (2022). [https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-och-lagar/dokument/protokoll/protokoll-20212252-torsdagen-den-13-januari\\_h90952/html/](https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-och-lagar/dokument/protokoll/protokoll-20212252-torsdagen-den-13-januari_h90952/html/)

32. ibid

Taken together, Sweden's contributions to Covax and its opposition to the TRIPS waiver raise questions about the ways in which countries navigate the concept of solidarity in practice. As a broader concept, solidarity is not simply about money. It takes into account empathy, relationships between countries, and mutually-beneficial actions. However, Swedish actors often equate money with solidarity, especially highlighting generous donations to distract from anti-solidaristic actions.

## **What future for solidarity?**

In a 2020 editorial in the Swedish Development Forum's magazine, aid expert Lennart Wohlgemuth argued that solidarity remains an important basis for aid. He noted that aid benefits Sweden through giving it much more influence in international politics than it otherwise would have had as a small country. It has also benefitted Swedish industry and research, and the connections built between Sweden and the world have "enriched" Swedish culture and society.<sup>33</sup> That is, even if solidarity involves sacrifice – often in terms of money – there is a return on this investment.

Although the current government has shifted from solidarity-based aid to more of a Sweden-First type of aid, solidarity remains an important motive for voters. This is a conclusion of the latest Sida-commissioned poll on aid:

There is exceptionally strong support for what might be called solidarity, which is the basis of the idea of aid. Almost 90 percent agree that all people have equal value and that those living in inhumane conditions should receive support.<sup>34</sup>

This is not because Swedes are inherently better people than those in other countries. Rather, as already argued, to some extent solidarity comes at least partially from education, tradition and social expectations. Moreover, there is an awareness of the strategic nature of Swedish aid – that aid benefits the donor in countless ways.

However, there are limits to sacrifice and, subsequently, solidarity. One of the Sida poll questions was:

Sweden has enough of its own problems that should be solved first, then we can start thinking about other countries.

33. Wohlgemuth (2025)

34. *Sidas attitydmätning om utveckling och bistånd*. (2023). Sida. <https://cdn.sida.se/app/uploads/2023/12/22153854/Sida-opinion-2023.pdf>

In 2016, 32% of respondents agreed with this statement (*stämmer ganska bra or stämmer helt och hållet*) which has gradually increased over time to 42%. The respondents were also divided by age, gender and education, with older people, women and more educated people more with this statement than younger people, men and people with less education. The first government bill on aid from 1962 set out that:

the idealistic motive for giving aid is, to a great degree, realistic.<sup>35</sup>

This remains somewhat true, but is likely less realistic today than in 1962.

## Conclusions

While solidarity is a complex concept, this essay has briefly discussed its contours within the wider context of international aid, using examples from Swedish aid, including international vaccine access. In the Covid-19 pandemic, Swedish solidarity in vaccine access was both real and performative. Sweden was one of only a handful of countries that contributed their “fair share” to Covax. However, it was also part of the high-income grouping of countries that opposed the TRIPS waiver and were accused of hoarding vaccine doses.

Moving forward, even if solidarity requires some sacrifice, it can be made an easier choice. In the case of a pandemic, this can be better data to support more equitable vaccine distribution. That Covax “failed” was partly because it was unpalatable to high-income countries. However, if an equitable (and more feasible) vaccine sharing system had been in place before the pandemic, it may have given countries pause before pursuing other arrangements. The TRIPS waiver situation, although not satisfactorily resolved from the perspective of many countries, highlighted need for increasing vaccine production capacity in low- and middle-income countries. Working within the context of the 2025 Pandemic Treaty, countries should prepare now for a more solidaristic approach to the next pandemic. Although, with the global health and wider aid system in crisis, this is easier said than done.

More broadly, Swedish aid has traditionally been based on solidarity. Being a generous donor has been strategically advantageous to the country and has also contributed to the country’s national self-identity as a “humanitarian superpower.” However, there are limits to solidarity. Part of Sweden’s credibility in global health relates to good living conditions at home.<sup>36</sup> Swedes are solidaristic because

35. Proposition 1962:100

36. Irwin, R. (2019). Sweden’s engagement in global health: A historical review. *Globalization and Health* <https://globalizationandhealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12992-019-0499-1>

of strong *folkbildning* movements and tradition, but also because they can afford to be so. Certainly, many arguments against aid are logically flawed – if Sweden stopped giving aid to Uganda, for example, this money would not magically be transformed into a new maternity ward in Haparanda. However, the optics remain. Swedish households are struggling with inflation and long waiting times for healthcare. Inequality is increasing and unemployment in some Swedish regions is at nearly 10%. Real and perceived struggles at home make international solidarity a harder choice.