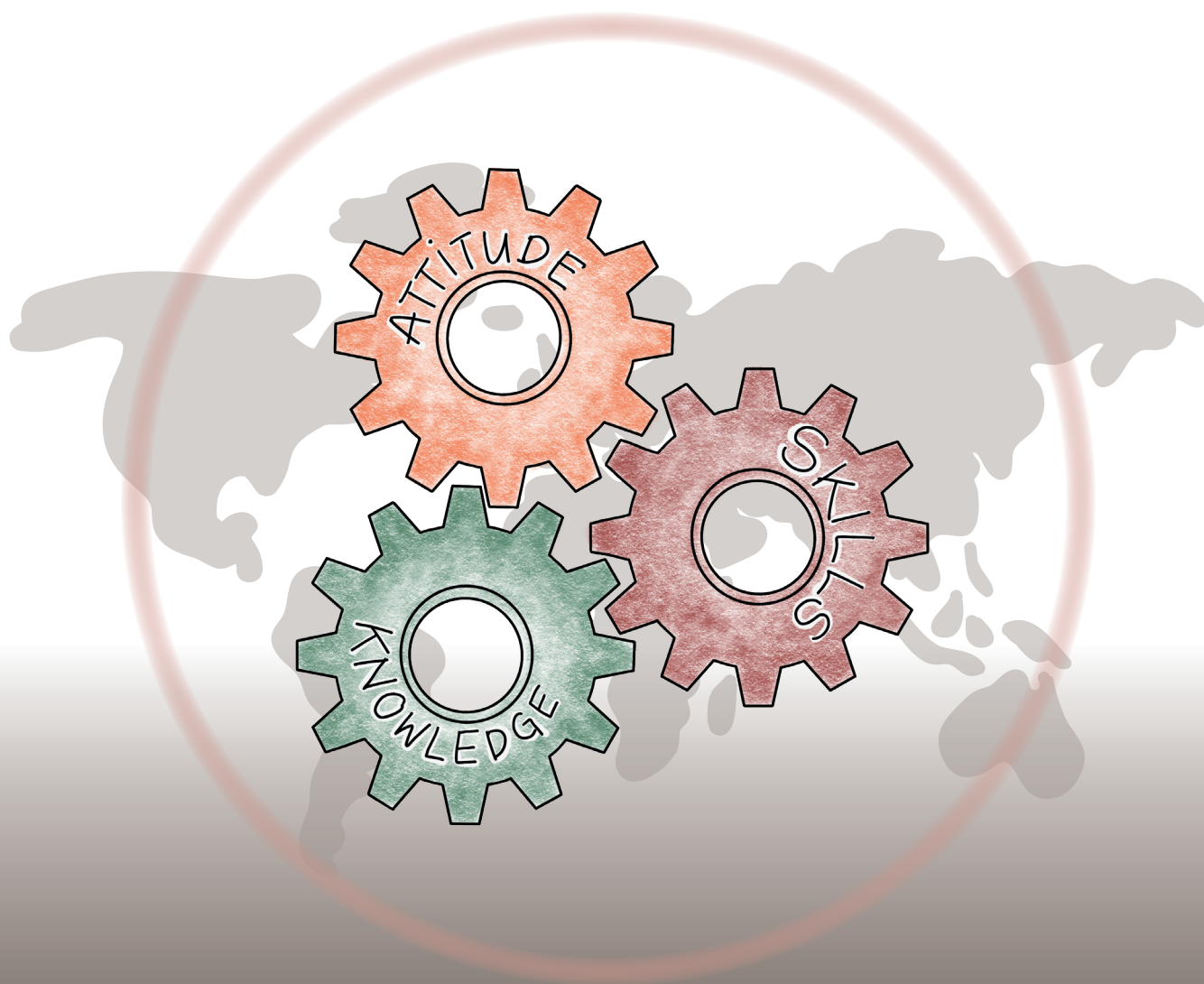


Future trends and competencies for the Swiss international cooperation sector

Recommendations for employers and training institutions

The following summary of the joint cinfo and Nadel 2022 trends and competencies study provides recommendations for employers and training institutions active in the international cooperation sector.



cinfo 

The Swiss Centre of Competence
for International Cooperation



ETH zürich

NADEL

Center for Development and Cooperation

ANALYSIS OF TRENDS AND COMPETENCIES RELEVANT TO IC IN THE FUTURE

Context

The international cooperation (IC) sector is dynamic and challenges professionals in terms of lifelong learning. Like all of society, the IC sector is experiencing changes, and as a result, the required competencies for practitioners are shifting. Subject-specific competencies are not enough to work in an increasingly complex world. Integrating and fostering method-specific, social and personal competencies into the learning journeys (work, further education) of development professionals can help them acquire and deploy their subject-specific competencies to their best ability, at work and in society.

Goal

The study aimed to analyse, in a Swiss context, which competencies will be important to respond to the needs of the IC sector in the future, focusing on the year 2030. To achieve this, the study explored:

- **emerging trends** specific to the IC sector
- the top **competencies** needed in light of these trends
- ways to **develop these competencies**, challenges, and related recommendations

Methodology

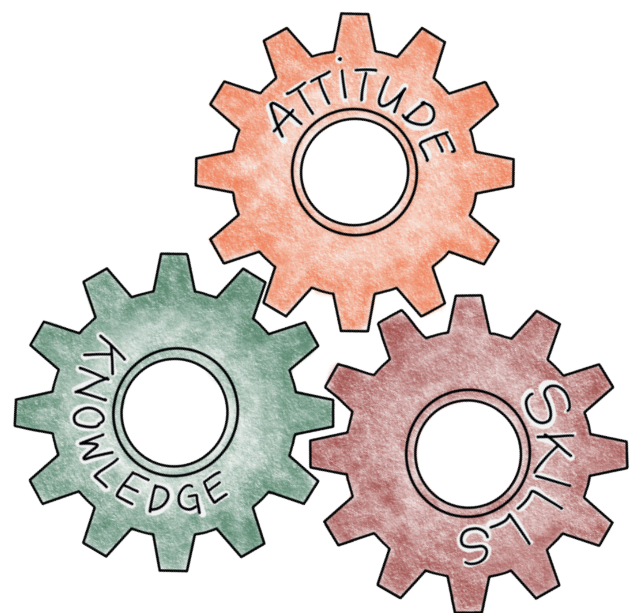
The findings are based on literature, a survey of 230 predominantly Swiss IC professionals, and 19 key informants – specialists for IC topics with different backgrounds. This study is based on a competencies framework that embraces the integration of skills, knowledge and attitudes.

How to define competencies?

Literature is broad regarding the definition of competencies. The “traditional” and simplistic concept of defining competencies as skills is being replaced with a more comprehensive view.

Competence, as understood here, comprises integrated pieces of **knowledge**, **skills** and **attitudes** and is assumed to be a prerequisite for adequate functioning on the job.

- **knowledge** reflects thematic expertise (what we know)
- **skills** reflect “abilities” or “capabilities” (how we use what we know)
- **attitudes** refer to predispositions or personality traits (how we engage in the world), which matter in terms of whether a person will effectively put their knowledge and skills into practice.





Main trends impacting IC

For the most part, a broad consistency between survey respondents, key informants, and literature regarding the most important trends for IC for the year 2030 was observed.

The following trends were considered to be of most importance:

- **Climate change**
- **Human displacement and migration**
- **Water scarcity**
- **Nexus (peace, humanitarian and development)**
- **Increasing inequalities**
- **Fragility**
- **Digitalisation and technological change**

The key informants also rated **Collaboration with the private sector** and **Localisation/decolonisation**, or a fundamental shift in the relationship between the Global North and Global South, as important trends.

Some of those trends relate to specific thematic issues that the sector will need to adjust to, such as climate change, digitalisation or water scarcity. Others relate to a fundamental shift in the relationship between actors and the foundations of the sector to date.

Several of these trends have implications for competencies.

Competencies gaining importance in the future

In light of these trends, the following competencies were considered the most important for 2030:

- **Collaboration, cooperation and teamwork** – linked to the proliferation of new actors, including private sector actors, as well as localisation of the IC sector
- **Adaptability and flexibility** – linked to trends, including nexus-based approaches based on growing interlinkages between development, humanitarian and peace work
- **Systems thinking** – linked to (geo-)political considerations and the systemic issues of climate change, water scarcity, migration and conflict
- **Critical thinking** – related to the trend of localisation of the IC sector, and the broader perceived need to reflect on approaches more critically



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EMPLOYERS AND TRAINING INSTITUTIONS

How should employers and training institutions cope with the corresponding implications and challenges?

Recommendations for employers

1. Adopt competence-based procedures that incorporate knowledge, skills and attitudes:

There is a need for organisational structures and procedures to enable competency development, such as **competency frameworks** or strategies, **dedicated teams** who can facilitate competency development, **more resources and time** dedicated to competency development.

“Organisations should be **explicit in linking competence and outcome**, i.e. what competencies are needed to be able to do or be this or that. Employers should better define their **job descriptions**, considering that ‘we’ mainly fund, advise, support, and work together with partners. This helps to **clarify the roles for future IC practitioners**, manages their expectations, and allows them to slot in more easily to IC.”

2. Foster an enabling organisational culture and leadership:

Competency development or change should be supported by leadership. The lack of organisational enabling environments is a key challenge. This relates, for instance, to **enabling structures**:

“Flexibility, decision-making, and trust building can be fostered effectively by applying more fluid management models like holacracy; when younger professionals get the opportunity to speak up and take decisions, and more experienced staff get the opportunity to learn to be more flexible or to enjoy more flexibility.”

It also relates to an **enabling culture** that values competencies per se and encourages staff to challenge themselves and each other.

This was seen by many key informants as a longer-term endeavour. However, two examples of how this change could take place are UN agencies using metrics for humility and self-awareness to recruit more humble leaders.

3. Enable experiential learning:

Most key informants proceeded from the assumption that “attitudes” can be taught and learnt, with an inclination towards **practice-orientation**. Workplaces can enable experiential learning and learning by doing by acknowledging opportunities with intentional learning goals and encouraging reflection on practice. Employers should provide for intercultural and interpersonal contact opportunities by allowing staff to increase their knowledge about cultures and residents in the countries where projects are implemented, to take into account local residents’ perspectives (be open to different points of view), and to build emotional connections with them (i.e., empathy). Lack of experiential learning is a key barrier for newer professionals. Key informants suggested that organisations should offer more junior positions.

4. Enable peer-to-peer learning:

This includes social peer-to-peer learning, mentoring, coaching and group work. Mentoring can be two-way – the newer professionals mentoring more experienced professionals and vice versa, given that newer and more experienced professionals often face challenges with different competencies. Another peer-to-peer learning option is to mingle with team members from different cultural backgrounds:

“We should create tandems between locals and expats because the thing is, expats talk to expats, and locals to locals.”

5. Offer formal training opportunities:

Employers can allow staff time or support them financially to complete formal training courses or programmes. Organisations can also arrange in-house training on core cross-cutting competencies:

“Big organisations with corporate character can and should provide in-house training. For matters like negotiation skills, writing skills, and leadership, specialised training institutes are needed.”

While these opportunities are often made available for subject-specific or method-based competencies, many key informants felt these training opportunities should also be made available for social and personal competencies. These include collaboration, cooperation and teamwork, adaptability and flexibility, creative thinking or specific attitudes (presence, humility).



TRENDS & COMPETENCIES

Recommendations for training institutions

1. Integrate formal study programmes within or alongside job assignments, field exposure or internships:

When possible, training institutions should integrate experiential learning into internships or on-the-job training to provide exposure to complexity, different perspectives and local knowledge, and to connect what is being learnt to reality. Dual education systems and specific programmes, where formal training is phased in intermittently with work, are worth considering in the IC sector. An example is the Certificate of Advanced Studies (CAS) programmes that can be completed while working.

2. Offer mentoring and exchange with practitioners as part of training programmes:

Providing peer-to-peer learning opportunities with practitioners and working with a network of partners/other training institutes from around the world, including the Global South, will offer new perspectives that may help to challenge assumptions / mental models.

3. Promote meta-cognition, the possibility for students to reflect:

Meta-cognition is the awareness and understanding of one's own thought process. This helps form autonomous students, increasing consciousness about their own cognitive processes and self-regulation so that they can manage their own learning and apply it to any area of their lives. Promoting reflection may also imply maintaining a balance between closeness and distance to practice, ensuring what is taught is not purely pragmatic, but also provides students with the context and freedom to challenge practice.

4. Explicitly integrate competencies in teaching, including knowledge, skills and attitudes:

Institutions could provide training targeted specifically at emerging competencies such as radical collaboration. Literature on the topic suggests that competencies are better taught as part of the subject domain in which they are used. It can be important to explicitly identify the competencies being addressed and acknowledge their role and purpose so that they are taken more seriously. Training on specific competencies could also be made relevant by structuring it around examples relating to emerging trends in IC.

5. Adapt didactic approaches and address structural issues within training institutions:

There is a need to experiment with different didactics, such as games and exercises, where course participants can test what applying “inner development” skills feels like. The traditional frontal class-based knowledge transfer paradigm is to be systematically complemented by interactive and agile teaching/learning models, including active learning. For example, critical thinking can be promoted through reflection; “What is my personal opinion? Where does it come from? How does an exchange with others impact my opinion?”. Cooperation and collaboration can be taught through interdisciplinary and intercultural teamwork and regular reflection on the teamwork process.

6. Adjust curricula flexibly to new topics and competencies:

Training institutes must address the current mismatch between training and employer needs. They should provide courses on relevant and upcoming topics (such as private sector engagement, climate change, or system thinking) and tailor this training to specific groups (such as senior staff or executives) based on their needs.



CONCLUSION

cinfo and Nadel's study on trends and competencies indicates that the emerging trends for the sector require revised, or even new mental models and approaches, and a "new set" of competencies, including not only knowledge and skills, but also specific attitudes at the level of reflection on action, meta-cognition, critical self-reflection, or introspection. Many of the top-ranked competencies also echo literature on '21st-century skills' or 'future skills', such as critical thinking, systems thinking, adaptability and flexibility, collaboration and cooperation, creative thinking and innovation, self-awareness and self-reflection, and complex problem-solving which are seen as competencies needed to deal with volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity, all of which are highly accentuated in the IC sector.

There is increasing recognition that attitudes can be acquired, especially if opportunities, particularly time, combined with the right mechanisms are provided to deal with complex tasks. Despite this growing recognition, barriers remain. Many of the perceived key challenges and responses revolve around how competencies are perceived, discussed, valued and approached in theory and practice.

Key barriers include organisational cultures that inhibit or undervalue learning, the unsystematic approach to fostering competencies, the lack of time or resources, the lack of relevant practice-oriented learning opportunities provided by training institutes and employers, and the lack of time to seize the few existing learning opportunities.

In the future, the concept of "Inner Development Goals" (IDG) should be better explained and implemented among communities and between individuals to strengthen the importance of attitudes.





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